Transcript 7: European Union External Action Service

Conversation with Nicholas Westcott. Recorded 25 April 2024, in person at the Oxford Martin School.

00:00:00 JE
Hi and welcome to Global Shocks, Nick Westcott. Could you just briefly introduce yourself, state your name for the record, and tell us a little bit about your past experience?

00:00:08 NW
My name is Nick Westcott. I've been a British diplomat for the last 36 years and served most recently as the EU's managing director, first for Africa, then for the Middle East and North Africa, based in Brussels, but covering those regions of the world. Before that, at the Foreign Office, I served in many places, including Brussels, Washington DC, and a couple of postings in Africa, including as the British High Commissioner to Ghana.

00:00:34 JE
Based on your experience working for the European Union, why would you say does thinking about global shocks matter?

00:00:40 NW
During that career, global shocks were constantly impinging on the everyday work, and it seemed the response was as much a part of everyday work as planning for a more ordered global future. In particular, I remember the Asian financial crisis, which blew up across the world in the late 1990s and required a very swift response. I was at the time working in the Foreign Office's economic department, working very closely with the Treasury on how G7 should respond to these crises in the Asian economies. And that was a classic economic crisis where response was needed very quickly.

More recently, the Arab Spring, which then degenerated into wars in Libya, in Syria, to a coup, counter-coup in Egypt, were shocks that required a response in a rather different way. They were geostrategic challenges to which Europe wanted to respond collectively. Those ones that I was directly involved in myself, likewise the collapse of order in Somalia, international efforts to try and rebuild some kind of coherent political structure and a security system. The other one that particularly comes to mind is the crisis in the Sahel, which began 2012, 2013, when I was dealing with that at the European Union, but it has continued, in fact, escalated to this day, and I think is increasingly a global impact.

00:02:23 JE
Can we just zoom in on your past experience, having worked at the EU's External Action Service – what exactly does the External Action Service do?

00:02:32 NW

Let's talk a bit about the EU's response to the Arab Spring and particularly what then turned into the Syrian Civil War, because that mattered to the European Union. North Africa and the Middle East are part of Europe's Neighborhood, with a capital N. And there are a whole set of economic and political agreements that the European Union collectively has with these countries to define the economic, trading, investment relations, as well as political relations. And they have association agreements with most of the countries of North Africa. They have a bilateral agreement between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the countries in the Gulf. And Turkey was obviously a candidate member for European Union membership.

So, there were quite complex, intricate and close relationships which required a collective response from the European Union, not just individual member states. So, when the crisis broke out, first of all in Tunisia and spreading eastwards through Libya, Egypt, up into Syria, the European Union tried to respond swiftly, largely in support of what they saw as a democratic movement, echoing what had happened 20 years before in Eastern Europe, once the Berlin Wall fell, and it was seen this was a moment of opportunity to support the democratic forces, liberalise the economies a bit and provide a more amenable neighbourhood for the European Union where there was more to share.

However, things didn't evolve quite the way that was seen. The European Union came forward with offers to support, but rather slowly, because changing trading relationships is not so simple. There are a number of divergent interests within the European Union, whether you should for example, accepted liberalisation of olive oil imports, which would have been of huge benefit to a country like Tunisia. It was indeed offered, but a smaller quantity than perhaps the Tunisians might have liked, which would have helped boost their economy, but obviously there are olive oil producers in Southern Europe who don't want too much increased import. So it was never quite as simple as it looked.

And member states would also come in through, in the UK, the Westminster Foundation, in Germany, the various “Stiftungs”, to provide political support to opposition parties that were trying to promote democracy, free speech, human rights in the countries that were in political turmoil to try and encourage these kind of forces. So, it was very directly involved both politically in the evolution and in trying to build a broader, more fruitful economic partnership with these countries. What we found was that the internal political dynamics were often rather different from what we had anticipated. And unlike the Velvet Revolutions in Eastern Europe, where it's quite clear they were getting rid of autocracy, they wanted to build in greater, stronger democratic institutions and aspired to join the EU.

Across North Africa and the Middle East, there were more complicated factors at play, which meant that there was not a single and clear direction of travel. And particularly in Libya, we saw that efforts to try and encourage democratisation were blown apart by the factional interests and the difficulty of creating any kind of political order after the demise of Colonel Gaddafi, who had held things together largely personally in his own idiosyncratic, autocratic way. But with his departure, there were no institutions that could then start building a political structure that everybody would buy into. So, the

country fragmented. And that led to a great deal of chaos, continuing civil war and a division of the country that has not been resolved to this day. Despite the efforts of the European Union, the United Nations, other countries to try and broker an agreement between the different factions.

In Egypt, again, we saw that elections were held, but it brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power, whose agenda was perhaps not quite as clearly democratic and beneficial to many of the people in the country as some had expected. And the eventual coup d'etat that ousted Morsi and brought in al-Sisi had a good degree of public support, even if development since then might not have been what people wanted at that time either. But the European Union found itself unable to control, it could try and support and encourage, but the local political evolution was turned out to be more complex and more difficult to influence, despite the efforts of then High Representative Catherine Ashton to be involved and encourage the forces of democracy to build a more resilient and accountable political structure.

But we are now where we are. Syria was the most difficult, because here what began as protests against the autocratic rule of the Assad regime turned violent, not least because of the response of the Assad regime, whose tradition, you might say, from father to son, was to repress any political opposition. And that provoked a violent response from groups who were keen to promote a more radical Islamic agenda, and groups who began to ally with al-Qaeda or in due course the Islamic State, and therefore were not the kind of democratic political forces that the European Union found easy to support, while they were happy to support a democratic opposition to Assad. They were not happy to support the armed factions that owed allegiance to terrorist organizations as they were defined. So, it became a lot more complicated.

And the problem in Syria was the European Union was by no means alone in wanting to influence the outcome. Turkey next door promoted a more Islamist opposition, along with support from Qatar. The Iranian regime gave support to Assad, seeing him as a more or less fellow Shia, and encouraged Hezbollah to go in support of him. So, then you also on top of this [had] Assad versus the opposition and the Islamic extremists against the moderates, you then had a Shia versus Sunni conflict entering into that space as well, of course, because the Turks not only wanted to encourage Assad's downfall and a more Islamist sympathetic government into place, but they wanted one that would contain the Kurds and in particular the PKK, who they deemed a terrorist organization, but which had bases in Syria.

And therefore, Turks saw this as an opportunity to weaken the Kurdish opposition that they faced at home. There were several different conflicts between different factions taking place in this space. The European Union threw its support behind the democratic opposition, civil society, the women's movement, and these were involved in a set of negotiations in Geneva throughout 2015, 2016, 2017, under the auspices of the United Nations. But there were negotiations that ultimately we've seen led absolutely nowhere. The Assad regime had no real interest in engaging. They wanted to retain the freedom to achieve a military solution to this. And in that from 2016 on, they had not only Iranian support, Hezbollah’s support, but explicit Russian support. And that gave them a significant military advantage that led to the situation where we are today,

where they've not recovered for Assad complete control over the country, but they have over a large chunk of it.

Apart from factions in Idlib, the Islamic jihadist movements, if you like, have been run out. ISIS was ultimately defeated in that sphere. But you end up with a situation that nobody particularly wanted, where there is no effective control, there is in practice a criminal economy. Based on the production and export of fentanyl and, various other smuggling businesses, that is not certainly not encouraging the reconstruction or the rebuilding of Syria, foreign investment is not coming in, and refugees are not returning.

What did the EU end up doing? It did what it could do, which was to focus its attention not on political intervention or material support to any of the armed factions, but providing humanitarian support to avoid the conflict spreading to neighbouring countries, and specifically Lebanon and Jordan, which bore a heavy burden in terms of refugees. Nearly 25% of the population of Lebanon is now Syrian refugees. Similar proportion in Jordan. So huge influxes, which would destabilize those countries, were the EU not to continue providing humanitarian support to enable those refugee communities to be accommodated and fed without excessive strain.

In the long run, this has not prevented Lebanon falling into further chaos, so the state has not completely collapsed at present. And there are other causes there in relation to Hezbollah's role and the rest. But in the short term, the EU was successful in avoiding other neighbouring countries being drawn into the civil war itself. And that, to some extent, was all the success that we could achieve. But it was a success. But that's where the EU ultimately had money. It could provide these kind of resources through UN agencies and the rest. And it did so, it ran a succession of fundraising conferences in Brussels to raise humanitarian aid to support the refugee populations.

So it was more a safety net than an effective intervention. But nobody in Europe was interested in responding to that shock by providing kinetic support to one factor or another. It provided political support to the civil society, provided humanitarian support. That's what the EU could do. And of course, that was not decisive. It was a damage limitation exercise. But in the long run, it did stop the flood of Syrian refugees, which in 2015 had threatened to destabilize some European polities and continues, in retrospect, to feed a far-right narrative that is gaining currency.

00:13:28 JE
It sounds like the EU faces a two-fold challenge when confronting crises, whether in Libya, in Syria, or in Egypt. On the one hand, the EU tries to act as a united institution with a coherent diplomatic position despite being made-up of many different member states. And on the other hand, it's not necessarily obvious which actors to engage with in these countries. As you mentioned, in every conflict, there are many different factions, right? So, can you give us an example based on your role at the External Action Service where you faced that kind of challenge?

00:13:59 NW

Two examples. One is in relation to a country where EU member states had no divergent interests, and that was Somalia. And when Somalia effectively disintegrated, it endured about 20 years of no effective central government. Al-Shabaab took over, but were not popular, certainly not with the outside world, were forced out, but re-establishing a legitimate and accountable government took a long time.

During that period of chaos, piracy took off like wildfire in the Gulf of Aden, and it became a very lucrative economic model for groups of people who otherwise had no effective source of income beyond fishing, and taking boats and holding them to ransom was far more lucrative than any fishing could be, so as it seemed easy to do, it caught on in a big way. The European Union collectively responded by setting up a naval force, UNAV for Atalanta, which in cooperation with the US and cooperation with the Chinese, effectively began patrolling the Gulf of Aden protecting convoys of ships as they passed through and taking in the end sufficiently robust action against the pirates that the economic viability of the model of hijacking ships evaporated and effectively the piracy problem stopped due to European Union intervention collectively putting together a naval force that was willing and able to take the necessary action.

This was accompanied on land by the EU, helping fund an African force called AMISON under the auspices of the African Union, which was able to re-establish some effective security control against Al-Shabaab on land. And that created a security umbrella within which the European Union could then encourage the different factions to reach a political deal effectively a federated state where local constituent provinces were able to retain a good deal of autonomy while still working under a national federal government as an umbrella. And that all happened after 2011, 2013 when I was involved with this, and was a successful stabilizing effort both at sea and on land to re-establish order where effectively the country had fallen into anarchy.

The second example though is in Libya, where different member states of the European Union had different interests and it was increasingly hard to maintain a common European position and therefore increasingly hard to have a decisive influence. And at the outset, I think there was a belief that, as in Eastern Europe, you just bring down the dictator and civil society will spontaneously rise up and establish democratic norms, which, as I said before, didn't happen. But as Libya then fragmented itself into different factions, political factions and armed groups, the French and Italians had different interests in different parts of the country and therefore were not wholly aligned and would pursue a direct policy because it was quite close to them, there were historic links with Italy, there were big economic interests in relation to France, in the oil industry, and they saw their national interests as protecting these interests rather than a single collective European position.

Both sides wanted Europeans to come in behind their position, but as they didn't coincide, it was hard to do that. And therefore it became very difficult to get a single European voice on Libyan issues, as a result of which the EU ended up just backing up the UN, but the UN didn't have enough clout in itself to bring the competing factions together. There was a Secretary General special representative from the UN who tried to broker negotiations. There were various deals that were landed, but never implemented, because nobody had sufficient leverage. And not just European

countries had divergent interests, but you also had Egypt, which had a particular interest. You had Algeria, which had a particular interest.

So there wasn't the unity of international opinion that had supported, through the African Union, the UN and the EU, a solution in Somalia. That did not exist in Libya, nor did it exist in Syria. We are seeing the same now in Sudan, where it's very hard to bring civil war to an end because the international community does not have a single united position. So, it depends on circumstances. The EU itself has to have a clear position and interest and a united front, but it then needs to work with other international actors if it's to have effective influence.

00:19:01 JE
Right, so let's think about the practical day-to-day business of the External Action Service. Was your job trying to reconcile divergent national interests in order to identify a common position? Or what was the procedure for formulating an adequate policy response or a position? What did that look like, practically speaking?

00:19:20 NW
The EAS only came into existence in 2011, so I was one of the founding members as the managing director for Africa, so nobody was quite clear what its role was to be. Although obviously the EU had been involved through Xavier Solana and the Foreign Affairs Council and the European Council had taken positions on international issues, but the EAS was meant to bring more greater weight and coherence to that external policy. My view was always that we should do this by trying to define common strategies in relation to particular geostrategic areas and challenges, to which you could get the member states to sign up, and which would then be a basis for responding to global shocks challenges that arose.

So, the strategy would define a direction of travel and our key interests, not necessarily what policy we should adopt in relation to everything. That's the mistake, I think that's what strategies are. And it was usually possible to get EU member states to sign up to a broad strategy. That then made the crisis response a lot easier, because you'd say, look, we've defined already, these are our broad objectives in this area, let's follow that. So, we had a strategy for the Horn of Africa. We defined a strategy for the Sahel. We tried, but did not succeed to define a strategy for the Great Lakes region. That was, again, there were some member states with particular interests that proved harder to corral together. And it did prove quite difficult in the Middle East. We agreed a strategy for Syria in the end, but it was the strategy I've described to you, the best we could do in these circumstances.

So, in the Sahel is quite a good example where we were able to get a common approach, but this tended to reflect perhaps rather more than was desirable the position of France as, if you like, the dominant member state in that region. It had a lot of influence at that stage, quite a lot of interests in the region, but we were able to get them to a place where the EU took proactive measures to encourage the settlement of the jihadist challenges and the separatist movements in Mali in particular, and

supported other countries to try and avoid the same happening there. As we can see in the long run, that strategy has not succeeded.

There is a good question whether, was it the strategy that was wrong, was it the implementation that was wrong, or was it just that France was too visibly in the lead of all this process in seeking, if you like, a military solution to the jihadist threat rather than the more political one? Or were we on a hiding to nothing because, in effect, whatever our strategy, we couldn't actually control the internal political dynamics in these countries, or influence it enough. There was always a dilemma where you had a democratically elected government and you wanted to support it, but they weren't necessarily dealing with the political challenges that existed, and this was explicitly the case in Mali, where it was very difficult to get President Keïta, [also known by his initials as] IBK, as was to negotiate a meaningful settlement with the Azawad separatists, the Tuareg separatists in the North, so they then preferred to ally themselves with the jihadist groups who would provide arms and support, and therefore the rebellion in the long run has expanded and multiplied, rather than a political settlement being reached.

And now we have a situation where the government in Bamako, with support from some external allies, primarily the Russians, are exacerbating the conflict rather than reducing it. They have strangely, having thrown out the French for having failed to deliver a military solution, they've brought in the Russians to deliver a more effective military solution, but it's not, it's getting worse, because the military solution will never work. It has to be a political solution. So, we are actually getting further away from a settlement.

But you have to admit that the EU's strategy has not delivered. That doesn't mean it was the wrong strategy. It may have been the only strategy we could perform. So, the External Action Service's role was to try and look ahead and agree the broad outlines of what a common position should be in terms of the direction of travel. But then member states would you hope act within that and, when necessary, collectively within that.

00:23:42 JE
And so how does the EU's external action service build resilience and preparedness? Is it about trying to predict or anticipate future scenarios or is it more about past lessons and longer term trajectories within each region that you're looking at?

00:23:56 NW
Yeah, for example, on the Sahel, we've spent quite a lot of time and effort designing a strategy for the Sahel. Firstly, you define what are the underlying factors that are driving political and economic development of that region. And the answer was it's being increasingly impacted by climate change, demographic growth continues to accelerate, and therefore you have governments that face huge challenges of diminishing resources and growing population.

Therefore, the EU's response to this would be helping the legitimate governments accelerate economic development by building trading relations that work, finding alternative means of development than just relying on agriculture, which is under

pressure, improving education so that you have a workforce with a wider range of options. The one element of that might have helped but was not likely to fly in the European Union was supporting outward migration, because that is, on the contrary, what the EU wanted to avoid.

But that increased the emphasis then, which we now see through the Global Gateway Programme, of increasing investment in the Sahel. But it has not delivered fast enough results that it's been able to change changed the political dynamics that are increasingly trending towards authoritarian solutions to the challenges, rather than democratically supported or accountable solutions to the challenges that those countries. We all accept that they're facing challenges. We know that the EU should be doing what it can to encourage productive solutions, but we have not been able to make those productive solutions sufficiently available to enough people that they have predominated. And therefore we see an increasing trend towards authoritarian government across the Sahel.

So, that's what a strategy was. So, it would identify what the challenges are, what we thought was going to be a desirable outcome, and therefore the actions that we need to take to try and support the trends going in the right direction. So, it was definitely forward-looking. That was the idea. They were sort of five-year strategies, what have we got to do in the next five years to try and avoid these challenges? There was a risk management, avoid these challenges derailing the process and supporting positive evolution.

00:26:13 JE
Were those strategies drawn up in response to a particular crisis in real time as it erupted, or did you try to take a longer-term view to be prepared for future crises?

00:26:24 NW
There had been thinking about a strategy before the crisis erupted in Mali in 2012. But it hadn't been finalized at that stage, and the crisis in Mali accelerated the need to agree the strategy. And therefore, once we knew that this crisis, we're going to have to deploy resources. We were looking at, for example, could we set up a peacekeeping mission of the kind that had worked in Somalia? Could we do that for Mali? And the answer was no, because the local governments and ECOWAS could not mobilize the troops necessary to deliver a peacekeeping force that we could support.

And therefore, ultimately, it was the UN that came in and set up MINUSMA as a peacekeeping mission. But in the long run, that didn't work either for a range of reasons. And the French remained president first through Operation Serval and Operation Barkan. And as we see, that hasn't ended particularly well either. They killed a lot of jihadists, but they didn't resolve the political problem, so that now we have greater difficulty. So, those are the strategies sometimes accelerated in the Horn of Africa, again, because of the challenges we had faced in Somalia, but successfully dealt with.

00:27:37 JE

Right. So of course, there's debate as to what counts as a crisis, when a crisis merits an EU response, and what kind of response it ought to pursue. I can imagine that complicates the External Action Service's work. Working for it, was that actually a recurring debate in your view?

00:27:55 NW
The debate did happen, but it tends to be very, as you say, what is a crisis, there are many different ones. While I was involved, we had the Ebola crisis, and that was quite clearly a crisis. It was one for which member states were very ill-prepared. The degree of medical cooperation amongst member states was very weak. And we at the External Action Service, together with ECHO, which is the humanitarian office, who were providing medical support to the countries most affected by the Ebola outbreak, set up a coordination mechanism with other EU services. You know, health services are basically a decentralized responsibility within the EU. So, national health ministries were all taking different decisions and the rest, which made no sense, where you had free movement within. So there had to be then some coordination on this medical crisis. And the EU was the body that could do that by bringing together the relevant people, the member states.

It took quite a lot of time. But the experience of doing that in Ebola certainly helped the response to the COVID crisis. And it was after my time. But again, you could, while many people said the EU's response was rather slow and clunky, nevertheless, there was a coordinated response. And that was helpful in the circumstances and did enable the epidemic to be contained. In geopolitical terms, global shocks would include something like the spread of jihadism following the fall of Libya and the reinforcement of the Islamic State in West Africa, West African province, ISWAP, and Ansara, various other jihadist groups across the Sahel, whose objective was explicitly to overturn the states and establish a caliphate in that particular region.

That was seen as a global shock to which we needed a European response, because instability in the Sahel would have immediate knock-on effects for Europe, at least through the movement of people across the Atlantic. So again, there was a recognition that we needed to respond collectively to this because we were collectively at risk, as we saw in 2015 with the migration crisis. So, that kind of, you know, Syria was also part of that. A lot of the refugees coming over in 2015 were Syrian refugees, not Sahelian ones, and therefore we had to find ways of collective response, which included cutting a deal with Turkey so that route across the eastern Mediterranean was stopped, but also trying to do deals with the North African countries that would limit the flow of people.

So, certainly in domestic political terms for European countries, instability in the neighbourhood is a collective shock that we had to try and deal with because of the migration consequences and therefore the political consequences within the EU. That was acknowledged. I don't know if you remember, towards the end of 2015, the European Council was meeting, which normally meets twice a year, was meeting more or less every month to review what are we going to do about the migration crisis, because it mattered to every single national government in the EU. And eventually they

reached a deal which, both with the North African countries and with Turkey, that overcame the immediate crisis.

So yes, the EU can respond, and at top level, where a global shock is seen to have direct impact. And we saw that again in the response to the Ukraine invasion, the second Ukraine invasion. Russia undertook a huge and very swift solidarity amongst the European response, which was self-interested, but the fact that the EU, the External Action Service existed, enabled it to be well coordinated. So yes, from that point of view, the External Action Service has proved that it can serve a purpose, even though it may not be successful in every case, that goes for every country's foreign policy.

00:32:12 JE
Speaking of cooperation, say with the UN agencies, but also regional organizations such as ECOWAS or the African Union. In a world where crises multiply, overlap and touch upon divergent issue areas, arguably cooperation with other organizations is particularly crucial. Is that part of the agenda for the EU's External Action Service as well?

00:32:35 NW
Yes, it's an explicit objective to try and work together with other regional and international multilateral organizations to resolve these issues. That, if you like, is one of the cornerstones of the post-war settlements that you actually put in place multilateral institutions that can deal with crises. So, on the Libyan crisis, for example, the then High Representative Federica Mogherini explicitly tried to set up a quartet of the European Union, the United Nations, the Arab League, and the African Union, who you would think would be the four international organizations that were relevant and should be enabled to corral the relevant forces to reach a settlement.

It didn't work. It didn't work because Egypt wanted to pursue its policy, Algeria wanted to pursue its policy, France and Germany, France and Italy had their particular interests, and neither the Arab League nor the African Union had much by way of leverage on the actors. Oh, and Turkey also became firstly involved, given its historic relationship with Tripoli. So, it didn't work because the EU did have coordination and money, but no military engagement. The UN could play the role that the UN did, but that depended on its member states backing it.

But neither the Arab League nor the African Union could actually impose any discipline on its members to take a particular approach on this one, and therefore trying to get a multilateral system in place that would deal with it did not work in Libya. But the EU and the African Union have pursued a fairly consistent policy of trying to work together, particularly in resolving crises. But again, the African Union has proven itself not particularly effective in tackling the crises in Ethiopia, in Sudan, or now across the Sahel. And ECOWAS itself, as we've seen, has been deeply divided over response to the Sahel crisis and announcement by the three juntas that they're going to withdraw from the organisation.

So, not all other regional organisations have the kind of coherence and ability to act collectively that the EU does. We try to build them up, we try to cooperate with them,

but it doesn't always work. But while in the EAS, I would consistently maintain very close liaison with UN and the UN actors, the Arab League and African Union, where they were involved, but also with the US. So, I'd have a monthly video conference call with the Assistant Secretary for Africa and the US. It didn't work quite as well on the Middle East, but on African policy. So, there was a big effort to coordinate.

And also, within the the EU, there's a difference. On Africa, not that many member states have deep interests. [The] UK was still a full member at the time I was there. So the UK, France, Belgium, Portugal, Spain had some interests. Germany had quite a broad interest. But once you got those on board, the others were quite happy for the external action service. On the Middle East, almost every member state has its own particular interests and its own historic alliances, and it was much harder to coordinate a position there because there was greater divergence on the Middle East and North Africa.

00:36:14 JE
So, you say that you had a regular conference call with the United States. Did you have a regular line of communication with Geneva as well? Would you be going around member states' representatives to gauge their positions, or how did that work?

00:36:27 NW
There are monthly foreign affairs councils, and they look at the most important issues. But in both jobs, responsible for Africa and then Middle East and North Africa, I would chair a monthly meeting of the directors from all member states concerned. These were the opportunity then to talk about the whole range of issues and that's where we negotiated the various strategies that we were putting in place, which we would then get blessed by ministers up above. The Foreign Affairs Council itself would look at Africa maybe once or twice a year, but it looked at the Middle East every single month.

So, there was then constant engagement at the ministerial level on Middle Eastern issues and much the same with Eastern European issues. That had to go along with coordinating within the EU institutions because the External Action Service was only one. We had to work with the European Parliament, with the European Commission, with the European Council to try and make sure all the institutions were pointing in the same direction. And then we were dealing with our external partners. But there, most would accept that I was speaking with a collective voice. They would, the Americans would still talk to the Brits and the French and the Germans, of course, bilaterally, and what their opinion [inaudible].

But for them, it was useful to talk to me, particularly on Africa, because the EU was seen as having clout and influence and, in many cases, a single position. But again, on the Middle East, it was once also more fragmented, and individual member states would have their own relationship with Saudi Arabia. I had no influence on the relationship with Saudi Arabia as the managing director for the Middle East.

00:38:02 JE

So, in your position, when did geopolitical divides come to the fore and affect your work most often and most strongly?

00:38:08 NW
Syria is quite a good example. So, the EU would try to play a convening role along with the UN through the humanitarian channel, but bringing together political actors who could then also try and agree a more coordinated political response to the crisis. So, the Brussels conference, there was a London conference, I think, 2015, and then Brussels conferences in 2016, 17, 18, 19, all of which there was a purpose which was to raise money, but we tried to get all the political actors together.

There was simultaneously a more explicit political coordination, the ISSC, which was actually co-chaired by John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, and Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister. And that tried to knock political heads together. And the EU participated in that, but didn't lead it and couldn't really lead it. So, we were there sort of representing all the member states, but the Brits and the French and the Germans were also around the table, but so were the Saudis and the Turks and everybody else. And that's really where the political discussions took place. But even that ran into the sand. And eventually it was the Astana Forum, which was a separate group.

The Russians pulled together of Russia, Iran and Turkey, who were basically the three groups who had armed involvement on the ground. And they then negotiated what an outcome might be. And they invited the UN to come and observe, but they didn't invite the EU. I think the US were allowed in to observe as well. And the Astana Forum, because it involved those who were materially involved on the ground, actually became the point at which decisions were taken. So yes, we did a lot of coordination with outside actors. We tried to bring them in. And our convening power worked quite well in some areas, like humanitarian assistance, but it didn't really exist adequately on the political side in relation to Syria.

00:40:13 JE
Coordination with other actors sounds like multi-dimensional chess. Maybe that's especially true of a still very young institution like the External Action Service of the European Union. Things get even more complicated, I guess, given the rise over the last few decades of more and more different international actors, affecting how diplomacy is being done and how it can be done. Have you felt the effects of that at the External Action Service?

00:40:37 NW
I think it was quite clear throughout my, or seven years there, and particularly towards the end of it, that the former multilateral structures that were used for resolving conflicts were becoming less and less effective. And you could see that to some extent explicitly in the Middle East. And almost simultaneously, but it marked a crossover point. You had the Iran nuclear negotiations, which were, if you like, a last hurrah of the multilateral system working effectively. You had the P5 all negotiating together with one country, Iran, to try and get them to agree to limit their nuclear ambitions. You had it endorsed by the United Nations. Immediately the deal was signed. You had the IAEA closely involved as an international institution with the relevant role and authorities to

do that. And it was a negotiation that succeeded. And it was a multilateral negotiation, and it worked the way we imagined the world was going to work after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But more or less simultaneously with that, you had the Syrian crisis, where the multilateral institutions proved effectively unable to resolve it, and national interests of all the neighbours took precedence over any UN, EU, or collective P5 intervention. The EU and the US tried to make the international multilateral institutions work in resolving the crisis. Kofi Annan was sent in, first of all, then Baradei, and then, you know, so the UN sent in envoys, but it didn't work.

Why? Because not enough of the surrounding states, all UN members, had interest in the collective solution. They were pursuing their individual interests and ultimately the U.S. and Russia ended up on different sides. So, at the same time that we saw the Iran nuclear negotiations of the last hurrah and success of the ... what we had envisaged as the multilaterally run world where conflicts could be resolved, you had a conflict then that blew up, which showed the inability of those multilateral structures to deliver a solution. There just was not enough clout within them, and you then saw a fragmentation and a perpetuation of the conflict. It's still a frozen conflict, it's not been resolved.

And we're seeing the same in Sudan now, and I fear we will see the same elsewhere with other [inaudible], where we do see the same in the Sahel. Russia is very happily encouraging authoritarian governments to ineffectively combat jihadism and try and sort of threaten the unity of West African states in dealing collectively with the problem. So, yes, there has been a very significant deterioration in the ability of the multilateral system to operate effectively in the way once envisaged. So we have a very different diplomatic environment. And the EU is still coming to terms with this in relation to Ukraine and the challenges there.

And again, with President Trump's abandonment of the Iran nuclear negotiations, that in some ways is even more symbolic than people realise. It wasn't just the end of that, but it was a repudiation of a way of doing business internationally. And should we get a Trump II administration, we will see that multiplied, which will then create a very different, I suspect, much more unstable world, which, if we're unlucky, it'll be a case of [inaudible] dealing with Russia, which is an imminent threat on its border. At the same time, it needs to present an approach.

00:44:26 JE
Going forward, what's the biggest challenge for EU foreign policy in the future?

00:44:31 NW
Climate change negotiations, but to keep the COP process going, that will only work if we are able to reduce conflict in the world. While conflict is going on, nobody will care about climate change. This is the immediate against the inevitable but longer term. So, it needs to keep a focus on climate change because that will drastically change the way the world works, how people are able to survive, live and be safe. But in the short term, they've got to deal with Russia. And that means also what the relations with the US and

with the other neighbours are going to be. So, there'll be plenty of challenges for the new commission when it's appointed.

00:45:11 JE
Right, so my last question to you: how can the EU External Action Service learn from all these past shocks in a sustainable way, so that the EU can avoid improvisation when a crisis hits and ensure continuity in its responses?

00:45:24 NW
The challenge has been the European Union doesn't have complete control over all the resources of its member states. As a man with a hammer sees every problem with the nail to be hammered in, so the EU has economic power and it therefore uses economic power in whatever shocks arise. So, it gives humanitarian support, it applies economic sanctions. Those are the instruments that it has, those are the instruments it uses. It doesn't have the full panoply of power, if you like, that a superpower would deploy, including military means and more political means. It could develop more political means and exert more political influence, but that would need the member states to accept that they will allow a single European spokesperson to use that kind of leverage.

And ultimately, political power needs to be underpinned by military, and that connection is not yet really there. So, the EU will continue to respond to global shocks with the instruments that it has at its disposal, which is sort of, as I say, economic, financial, to some extent coordination. And these are shocks like health pandemics as well as others. And with each crisis, to some extent, the EU learns. And you're quite right, the EU was certainly able to act internationally in responding to crises before the EAS existed.

But the EAS should provide a more effective way of pulling together the economic and the political response. That was its purpose in being created within the European Union and amongst the member states. But it has to carry credibility. Member states will ignore it unless they accept that the EAS has authority and has competence in dealing with this. And building that up was an integral part of what we were trying to do when the EAS was formed. And I think as the challenges get bigger, the EU always evolves in response to crises.

And now we are facing harsher external threats. And I think given the changing balance of both military and economic power in the world, the EU either has to step up and coordinate more effectively, use its external action service more efficiently, or it will begin to disintegrate.

00:47:42 JE
Well, on that note, Nick Westcott, thank you ever so much for joining us today at Global Shocks. It's been a great pleasure talking to you and hearing from all your fascinating experiences at the EU's External Action Service. Thank you.

00:47:54 NW
Not at all.