

The goal of the EU's foreign policy must be to bring something truly unique and different to international relations, Catherine Ashton tells Simon O'Connor

THE ACCIDENTAL DIPLOMAT

For the second time in a little over a year, on November 19 Catherine Ashton was somewhat surprised to find European greatness thrust upon her.

The British trade commissioner's elevation to EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy owed much to the fact that a political deal had been done to give the position to a woman affiliated to the centre-left. That such considerations trumped concerns over the fact that Baroness Ashton had never held elected office and had negligible foreign policy experience, was widely decried.

Yet in other ways, Ashton does not look ill-suited to her new role. She describes herself as a negotiator, and as trade commissioner, her genteel style was a welcome change for interlocutors alienated by the more abrasive ways of her predecessor, Peter Mandelson. She is known as a hard-worker, serious and focused. She will need all of those traits in a job that will combine a punishing travel schedule with heavy duties in Brussels, chairing EU foreign ministers' meetings, taking part in the work of the European Commission as its first vice-president and building up the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Union's nascent diplomatic corps. The previous High Representative, Javier Solana, has reportedly called her brief "impossible".

"I don't think the job is undoable," says Ashton, who describes Solana as a good friend. "The agenda is big, but between the three commissioners who will be working with me as a team, and the 27 foreign ministers, I've got 30 people who will have great

expertise across the world.

"The point about my role is to pull it all together. You don't have to be on a plane 24 hours a day to do this job," she argues. "Yes, I want to represent the European Union. Yes, I want to be travelling to places. Yes, I want to meet people and to understand our foreign policy issues on the ground. But in a sense, it's all about controlling my own agenda and making sure my priorities are absolutely clear."

"It's all about controlling my own agenda and making sure my priorities are absolutely clear"

Ashton sees her job as being built around two core tasks: "negotiating a position for the European Union in its foreign policy" and "building the strategic alliances that we need". Linked to this, she says, is "perhaps the most important factor as far as I can see in my early days, which is bringing together military, economic and political to form one vision – that those on the outside

looking in can see is Europe acting as a global actor on the world stage."

Of the current crop of EU foreign ministers, just one is a woman – Bulgaria's Rumiana Jeleva, and she is due to become her country's European commissioner. Moreover, many of these people have known each other and been acquainted with the key issues on the agenda for several years. Is moving in to preside over such a group a daunting prospect? Ashton says her welcome into the Foreign Affairs Council (when we spoke she had just participated in the last of these meetings to be chaired by the rotating presidency, under Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt) has been warm.

"Some of them I know anyway because, of course, I have been very actively involved in the





Western front: Ashton, pictured with US Trade Representative Ron Kirk, describes Washington as Europe's most strategic partner

Photographs: Reuters

Justice Council [as a former UK justice minister] and some of them have made the transition as I have done from justice to foreign affairs. They are very welcoming," she says.

Ashton will be judged to a significant extent on her ability to forge unitary positions that are meaningful and reflect the "highest common factor" rather than the "lowest common denominator", in the words she used during her first appearance in the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee in early December. "I meant by that that it's not just about trying to find the conclusion to a meeting that just gives us the bare bones of a decision, which takes on board everybody's sensitivities to the point where what you are saying doesn't mean very much," she explains.

"It's about actually getting us to think through and address some of the serious questions and see where we can move forward rather than stand still. Take for example what we are trying to do in Afghanistan. What we now need to do is bring together the resources that we've got and make them even more effective than they are now. And that requires 27 foreign ministers to sit down with me and work through what that means. Both in terms of the bureaucratic issues (how do you bring different elements together?) and also in terms of the forward-looking strategy (where do we want to be, what do we want to achieve?)."

Her biggest job, Ashton says, will be building the EEAS – a difficult and politically charged task. The new "EU foreign service" is to be staffed by officials seconded from three sources – the Commission, the Council and the member states. Ashton is chairing a small steering group to put flesh on the bones of this plan, and is due to present a strategy for the EEAS to the European Council by April. This group is to "prepare the papers and the ideas and be the guardian of what this service actually should be", she says.

"That will help me pull together the vision that we want to have to be able to present this to the Council, to be able to talk about this with the Parliament and to be able to deal with this in the Commission. The things that we are talking about are these: What is the sort of leadership that we need to have? What does Europe bring that is different to what member states have been bringing – sometimes for hundreds of years – in their relationships with third countries? How do we do it differently? What is the 21st century foreign policy for the EU?"

The biggest challenge, Ashton argues, will be to work out what the EEAS can do that will be unique. "When you go into an embassy of a member state anywhere in the world, you know which country you are in. How will it be that when you go in to look up the External Action Service somewhere in the world, you'll know that you are with Europe? It's that feeling of 'this is what we do and this is what we do well'," she says.

"There are different things we could do with that. It's not that we have a dearth of ideas – rather there are lots of different things and the question is really to distil down what already works well on the ground. Fortunately I've been to visit many delegations of the Commission in my capacity as trade commissioner. And there is lots of experience on the Council side with what Javier [Solana] was doing across

the world. How do we bring that together and understand what actually works effectively and what member states value in those places, while being different?"

In view of a widely forecast victory by the Eurosceptic Conservative Party in Britain's general election, expected in May, there has been speculation that the Council will move to declare the EEAS operational sooner rather than later. But Ashton denies that this is the case. "It's complete rubbish," she says. "The elections in the UK are irrelevant to the timetable that the Council has set up. I was fortunate that the leader of the opposition in the UK sent me his best wishes on me getting the job.

"There are elections all the time in different member states. There are different views. But the main thing is that the decision that was taken is that we are going to have this service and whichever member states are represented by whoever at the time we are debating it will be the ones that set the direction."

As the high representative will have one foot in the Council and another in the Commission, Ashton will have to walk a tightrope between the two institutions – and between the competing supranational and intergovernmental tendencies these embody. This will be difficult enough. But a third consideration is how to keep the European Parliament on side – both before and after her confirmation hearing in late January – without involving MEPs more closely in EU foreign policy formulation than ministers might deem necessary. By agreeing to appear in front of the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee on her second day in the job, she gave a strong signal that she would accommodate the assembly.

"The Parliament is an important institution and Lisbon makes it more important," she says. "My experience – I've been a parliamentarian in the UK, albeit in the House of Lords, which of course is non-elected – is that I've always had great respect for the Parliament. As trade commissioner, I always found them incredibly helpful. They've got real experience as well, many of them, and I want to use that. Now, there are different roles for the Council, the Commission and the Parliament in terms of what I'll be doing, but that doesn't mean that they haven't got a significant role to play."

Ashton's tenure will expire in 2014. Will we be closer or further away by then from a world dominated by what some see as an emerging "G2" of the United States and China? "When I've met with China and been in the summits, they have made clear that they don't want a G2," she says. "I think what China is looking for is its place in the world." As for the US, Ashton describes Washington as "our most strategic partner".

In what is an increasingly multi-polar world, the high representative sees Europe as having its own, very distinct position. "We are a group of countries that has strong relationships across the globe, for different reasons – historical and cultural – and we are able to use those relationships to further what we want, whether that is in trade, in the Doha round, or in foreign policy issues," she says. "I think what we will see is that there are several significant players around the world – of which the EU is very definitely one."

"When I've met with China, they have made clear that they don't want a 'G2'. I think what China is looking for is its place in the world"