

ELITES IN EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING: CONSENSUS AND COMPETITION¹

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Abstract: Elite theory up to now has been largely neglected within foreign policy analysis. This paper attempts to apply the concepts of elite theory on European foreign policy-making. Its focus is on elite consensus and competition, not least because such cleavages are particularly evident in this arena, where Member States' decision-makers compete with each other and with the various Brussels institutions, while at the same time speaking the language of cohesion and solidarity. Forms of significant scrutiny for common European diplomacy are less visible. There is a political and informational gap between the national parliamentary processes and the increasingly complex processes of foreign policy coordination. Thus when a crisis arises, national politics and institutions move into the vacant space.

Keywords: elite theory, European integration, recruitment, foreign policy making, consensus and competition

The subject of 'European foreign policy' has become immensely popular over the last two decades. The term generally refers to the attempts of the European Union to produce a single foreign policy, represented technically by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (viz. the 'CFSP', deriving from Pillar two of the Maastricht arrangements) but in practice by much cross-pillar activity involving both the Council and the Commission sides of the EU institutions. Some of us prefer to extend the definition to include the *tout ensemble* of EU and Member State external relations, at the same time acknowledging an even greater looseness of purpose and diplomacy than is represented by the EU's efforts.

The literature which this subject has generated is divided more or less equally between the substance of policy and the processes of policy-making. What has not been done, however, is to tackle directly the question of how far those involved in the making of European foreign policy constitute a recognizable elite. Indeed, elites and elite theory have been neglected more generally within Foreign Policy Analysis, and perhaps within Political Science as a whole, since the influential writings of C. Wright Mills (1956), W.L. Guttsman (1965) and Geraint Parry (2005[1969]) in the 1950s and 1960s. This brief paper attempts to suggest how we might begin to think about elites

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within the context of European foreign policy-making, and why it is important to do so. It thus relates directly to the theme of elite consensus and competition, not least because while the concept of an elite inherently entails the twin possibilities of consensus (within the elite) and division (between competing elites and between the elites and the mass) such cleavages are particularly evident in this arena, where Member States' decision-makers compete with each and with the various Brussels institutions, while at the same time speaking the language of cohesion and solidarity.

IS THERE A SINGLE EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY ELITE?

The answer to this question depends on the initial understanding of an elite. If we follow the classical view, that to be self-sustaining an elite needs coherence, the capacity to co-opt, and an element of conspiracy, then it is difficult to argue that there is a single European foreign policy elite, with clear boundaries. There may be a discernible political class which occupies with such matters, and tends to monopolize the relevant expertise, but that is a different matter, to be discussed at a later point. The existence of 27 foreign ministries and diplomatic services, together with the Commission, Council Secretariat and European Parliament Secretariat (to say nothing of the staffs of the national parliaments and other national ministries) makes the attribution of coherence and conspiratorial characteristics inherently implausible. The tendency to co-opt, however, may be observed even in this broad field; foreign policy is still a sensitive and often secret area, requiring a particular set of qualities. Those who inhabit its world, in whichever corner they work, are always on the look-out for reliable members of the successor generation, and tend to encourage them through informal contacts as well as the strict operations of the meritocracy. Yet even here, there are competing views as to what kind of person is desirable, expressed in particular by reference to diverse foreign policy traditions and national political cultures.

There are thus two ways of thinking about of a European foreign policy elite: (i) the relatively small group of people who are professionally employed to work for the European Union institutions in the formulation and execution of the CFSP and the associated common policies; (ii) the much wider and looser association of people who have professional expertise both on EU foreign policy, and on European foreign policies in the plural, that is, including also the activities of the Member States, which often converge (and just as often do not) around those of the EU. What follows looks at both these perspectives in turn.

THE EU FOREIGN POLICY ELITE

The apparatus of the European Union contains more – and more complicated – pieces of foreign policy machinery than is at first apparent. Given the process of 'Brusselisation' which has taken place over the last 20 years, the rotating presidency of the Council (itself due to be made redundant in the Lisbon Treaty) now takes second place to those working near the Rond-Point Schuman. The latter include the staff of the

Council Secretariat, many of whom help to service externally-related activity, and in particular the officials working for High Representative Javier Solana, whether in his cabinet or in the Policy Unit. Their total was estimated at 80 in 2005 (Hocking and Spence 2005: Appendix 1). There is also the Situation Centre, responsible for intelligence collation, and the Military Staff (c. 135) located since the onset of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), just up the Avenue de Cortenbergh, together with (since 2004) the European Defence Agency, now with a staff of around 100. Just as important on the Council side of the equation is the Political and Security Committee (COPS), consisting of members of the permanent national representations, which replaced the peripatetic Political Committee after the Treaty of Nice in 2000.

To this increasingly elaborate architecture must be added the more established bureaucracy of the European Commission, with its Directorates-General of External Relations, Enlargement, Development, Trade and Humanitarian Assistance. The External Relations DG alone has a senior expert staff of around 80, while there must be nearly 400 senior policy staff dealing with foreign policy issues in the Commission as a whole – remove the word ‘senior’ and the figure is 2,260, according to Hocking and Spence (2005: Appendix 1).. It is, however, a matter of debate and uncertainty as to where the boundary lies between issues which are external and which are purely internal to the EU – if indeed, it can be drawn at all (Smith 2004). Not to be forgotten also is the European Parliament (EP), with its cluster of knowledgeable MEPs and the well-resourced and informed Secretariat which services it, including in particular the EP’s Foreign Affairs Committee.

National civil servants are naturally focused on their own countries’ diplomacies, but at any given time there are always some dedicated to liaison with the central machinery – even including some serving in embassies accredited to states outside the EU. But for the most part this section of the EU foreign policy elite also resides in Brussels. Apart from the members of the COPS it is made up of other supporting staff in the permanent representations, the Correspondents and Political Directors based in national capitals who fly out for regular meetings, and those in national military staffs who are designated as points of liaison with the ESDP.

Thus even the ‘technical elite’ of those working for or to EU foreign policy is an extensive and multifaceted body. It suffers, accordingly, from centrifugal as well as centripetal forces. Even the formal procedures do not all push in the direction of cohesion, given the turf battles which characterize both inter-DG relations within the Commission and – *a fortiori* – the relationship between the latter and the Council Secretariat. The creation in the Treaty of Lisbon of a double-hatted High Representative (the ‘Foreign Minister’ suggested in the Constitution) is intended to create a single line-manager for both sides of the institutional equation, but it would be a miracle were rivalries and competing agendas to disappear.

It is true that there has been a tendency in recent years for the relatively small group around Dr. Solana to turn itself into an inner elite, to provide leadership and direction in the EU’s high politics, as with the drafting of the European Security Strategy in 2003. The Special Representatives who have proliferated for different regions and crises also answer to Solana, while if the proposed External Action Service comes into being it will provide the basis for a European diplomatic service in parallel with those

of the Member States, boosting Solana's resources considerably. Still, the 'Solana Executive', as it might be termed, does not have either the formal powers or the resources to dominate the policy process. It is subject to a wide range of cross-cutting loyalties – national, ideological, bureaucratic – which dilute its status as an elite. This fact is compounded by the involvement of external actors. Until the EU becomes wholly independent in terms of security and defence it has little choice but to engage in extensive cooperation with NATO, and to rely on national capabilities. Paradoxically this is the more so since the start of the ESDP, given that a purely civilian European foreign policy is more or less self-sufficient. The consequent interpenetration of systems (Solana is himself a former NATO Secretary-General) impedes the emergence of a coherent EU leadership group. The ambiguous role of Turkey and the associated Berlin Plus arrangements testify to the fuzzy boundaries of the EU's foreign and security policy-making system.

All this said, few outsiders understand the complex mosaic of this system. To them it looks like a tight Atlanticist elite, with the varying institutions and individuals having much more in common than divides them. Even the Russians, who play the divide and rule game well, and therefore perfectly appreciate the tensions between NATO and the EU, and between the EU and its Member States, probably assume that the European individuals involved, whether politicians or officials, are fairly interchangeable in their attitudes – and, looking at the careers and beliefs of key figures like Willem van Eekelen (WEU and NATO), Pauline Neville-Jones (European Commission and British Joint Intelligence Committee), or Solana himself, one can see why. The limited number of high-level experts on the circuit means that they know each other, help to facilitate key postings, and – broadly speaking – operate within a manageable consensus on issues of policy substance. They operate on the basis of a kind of 'liberal realism' (Hill 1989) in relation to the EU's role in the world; that is, a pragmatic understanding of its limits, and dependence on the US provision of security, but far short of the scepticism about the EU's lack of beef so often encountered in Washington, and epitomized by the views of Richard Holbrooke (1999) and Robert Kagan (2003) – albethey now modified. Seeing the elite as tight and conspiratorial would be taking things too far, given the large number of states involved (and enlargement to 27 will have interesting long-term effects at the personnel level, as at others) but given the increasing tendency for diplomats to work exclusively on a circuit (in this case the Euro-Atlantic circuit) anyone working in the system for some time is likely to develop to a commitment to its importance that will not be shared by outsiders, even of the same background. It is noticeable, for example, that European diplomats who have served mostly outside their own continent, tend to be much more sceptical of the value of European foreign policy, sometimes even failing to notice its existence (Rijks and Whitman 2007).

To some degree external incomprehension may be the converse of increased cohesiveness inside the EU elites, epitomised by the increasingly noticed phenomenon of 'Europeanisation'. This term of art has many ramifications but essentially it refers to the tendency of the national systems of Member States to become oriented towards the agendas and processes of the European Union, and to define national interests increasingly in European terms (Wong 2005a, 2005b). This is a form of policy transfer and learning, but such things only occur through the agency and behaviour of individual human beings, who

do not always conform to structural pressures. Thus those Member States officials who work in the sphere of EU foreign policy cooperation will have internalized common attitudes to varying degrees, according to their personal views and national traditions. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that certain processes of socialization have taken place over time, if only with respect to conforming to the procedures of the CFSP and ESDP, and to regarding it as a semi-legal regime which, if ignored, imposes certain costs – of missed economies of scale, damaged reputation and diminished future trust. At the personal level, those who participate in defections from a common line, will have to explain themselves constantly to irritated colleagues, as German diplomats discovered when their country recognized Croatia and Slovenia in December 2001, having just signed up to a collective procedure for doing so at a later date. This trauma made Germany revert to its previous caution over the possibility of breaking ranks.

Europeanization in foreign policy should not be exaggerated. There are still many occasions when members of the system have different views on a problem, and are willing to pursue diverging national lines as a result. Furthermore, not all national diplomats even work within the European system, let alone are shaped by it. Nonetheless, for the smaller Member States in particular, it is difficult to sustain a foreign policy without leaning heavily on the common European structures (which are far preferable to relying on a single, larger, ally for support). Accordingly their staff will define their activities in relation to the CFSP, even if they do not always follow them. This is less true of the new members from Central and Eastern Europe, which cannot ignore Washington's requests on global issues, as they depend on the USA for their security. But even they are beginning to show signs of settling in to common European practices. The more jobs their people get in the Brussels institutions, the more they will have the sense of belonging to a distinctive group, or elite. As for the big five states, Germany, Italy and Spain are convinced of the value of European foreign policy, and persistently promote it. France, despite Sarkozy's moves towards Atlanticism, still hopes to establish (indeed, to lead) a strong European pillar within the West, while Britain has (since 1998) finally accepted the value of a European security dimension, leading even its notoriously sceptical military cadres to work effectively with French and other colleagues, first in the Balkans but also now further afield, as in Afghanistan. Through the ESDP the EU foreign policy elite has been widened, which carries some risks for the integration process – witness the frequently expressed fears of 'renationalization', or of the 'militarization' (even NATO-ization) of the EU. But by the same token it has become a more significant set of policy networks on the general international scene, and a important career-path for talented young Europeans.

THE WIDER EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY ELITES

The number of people involved in the serious discussion of foreign policy issues in European has undoubtedly grown significantly over the last two decades, while the end of the Cold War has led to much more interaction across a single European space. As a result it is difficult to argue that there exists a single, cohesive and self-perpetuating elite. On the other had, there certainly is much overlapping between the various national and trans-national elites which thrive in this environment.

A broad view of the possible participants, à la Anthony Sampson (2004), requires analyzing the 'attentive public' as much as those technically responsible for foreign policy. Even the latter consist not only in those (as listed above) who work in or to the relevant EU foreign policy institutions, but all members of the political and bureaucratic classes in the 27 Member States. These days people do not work in strictly defined compartments; any 'home' ministry may turn out to have responsibilities in relation to foreign policy, given the increasingly wide definition imposed on the term through issues like money-laundering and migration. Politicians and officials can thus drop in and out of what is necessarily a large and loose foreign policy elite.

Supplementing the national cadres, however, are the staffs of the many international organizations (IGOs) based in and working for Europe. Of these, the most important are (with their headquarters in brackets) the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), the Organisation of Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE, Vienna), NATO (Brussels), the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, Paris), the Western European Union (WEU, Brussels – not yet formally abolished), the European Free Trade Area (EFTA, Geneva), Benelux (Brussels), the Nordic Council (Copenhagen), and the UN's Economic Commission for Europe (Geneva). Members of all these organizations will be drawn into foreign policy debates from time to time, and have the qualifications to move in their careers between IGOs, and between national and international institutions. Some members of key outside states, notably the USA and the members of the EU's 'Neighborhood Partnership' may also participate in specific discussions of relevance to them. A member of the US State Department, for example, is currently serving on secondment in the German foreign ministry in Berlin.

Moving outwards from the official decision-making circles, it is necessary to include in our cluster of elites the array of political parties and parliamentary staffs in the region. These do not always liaise well *inter se*, despite the best efforts of the EP to act as a point of common reference, but they do represent a reservoir of outward-looking expertise on which national debates can draw, on the frequent and inevitable occasions (such as the Danish cartoons crisis) when a local issue suddenly explodes onto the international scene and necessitates some kind of cooperative response.

The next ring of concentric circles involves civil society proper, with journalists, academics and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The category of journalists itself divides into the small group of key opinion-formers known across Europe, such as Josef Joffe, Andrés Ortega and Timothy Garton Ash. They have access to the highest political circles on an inside-track basis as well as to millions through their writings. The newspapers in which this kind of work appears, such as *Le Monde*, *El País*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Financial Times*, have been rightly characterized as the notice-boards of the cross-national elite. The larger part of the relevant journalistic community, however, consists in the less famous foreign correspondents and occasional commentators employed by all the national dailies, popular and otherwise, together with the burgeoning number of websites, plus radio and TV stations. Local media increasingly rely either on syndicated columns or simply on researching among the sources provided by web-sites like that of BBC News, which are correspondingly influential. It is increasingly easy, therefore, for non-expert journalists and even citizens, to participate in debates on foreign policy issues, thus

breaking down the notion of a closed elite – although having a (temporary) voice should never be confused with (privileged) access. The use of weblogs, revealingly by politicians as much as any one else, may in the long run be even more corrosive. Alternatively it might drive certain key foreign policy debates back underground.

The academic community following international relations is growing exponentially, as the result of student interest in the subject, which is feeding through ever more PhDs and more and bigger departments specializing in the subject. The UK is the main centre for this activity, which is in line with the country's key role in the CFSP. What is out of line is the relative unimportance of French academics in debates about European foreign policy-making. Key individuals like Raymond Aron and Pierre Hassner have always been important, but in general International Relations (IR) is not a major subject in French universities. French intellectuals are usually noticeable for their absence at academic conferences in the area. This is not true of the German, Benelux or Nordic groups, while Central and Eastern European activity is increasing, fostered by European Commission-sponsored research networks. The southern presence, however, is patchy at best.

Certain institutions represent nodal points in the production of knowledge on international relations, and on European foreign policy (if not on national politics or diplomacy, which has come to be neglected through various forms of disregard of the nation-state as an entity). Among the national universities, Aberystwyth, King's College, London, LSE and Oxford are major centres in the UK, with Universities in Barcelona, Berlin, Cologne, Copenhagen, Dublin, Lund and Oslo also making notable contributions. At least as influential, in terms both of their research outputs and the numbers of young scholars they train are the international universities, such as the College of Europe (Bruges and Warsaw), the Central European University (Budapest), the European Institute of Public Administration (Maastricht) and the European University Institute (Fiesole). The graduates of these institutions will not only populate and shape a large number of university departments for the rest of this century; they will occupy posts in the diplomatic and other services of the Member States, the EU and every other kind of international organization in the region. Their formation, therefore, both intellectual and political, will determine the nature and tendencies of our foreign policy elites for the foreseeable future.

NGOs and think-tanks are the last major component from civil society which goes to make up Europe's elite. They are increasing at a phenomenal rate, partly in response to the numbers of educated young people arriving on the job-market from educational institutions, and partly in response to political demand. Many of these are 'cause groups', dedicated to a particular end, whether the control of the arms industry (SaferWorld), or providing decent health care for the Third World (Médecins sans frontières). They often succeed in achieving a privileged, corporatist, relationship with governments, and with the European Commission, as a result of their expert lobbying. More significant at the level of strategic policy-making are the institutes which seek to influence the general foreign policy debates, both at the European and national levels. Prominent here are the Stockholm Institute for Peace Research (SIPRI), the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, London), the Centre for European Reform (CER, London), the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy

(Eliamep, Athens), the Centre for European Policy Studies and the European Policy Centre (The EPC), both in Brussels, together with national institutes for the study of international affairs, notably in London, Rome, Berlin and Paris. The major players in these organisations have influence over policy through their access to political circles, their ability to place articles in the press, and their freedom from teaching responsibilities (although they usually have to spend much time on fund-raising). They also frequent, together variously with journalists, academics, politicians, NGO staff and businessmen, annual conferences to discuss international affairs, of which the most famous is that held in Davos each winter. Other significant gatherings are the Anglo-German reunions at Königswinter, the Anglo-Italian ones at Pontignano, and the Greek-hosted meetings at Halki. The EU's own Institute of Security Studies in Paris (EUISS) plays an important *faux*-think-tank role. There are many others, both bilateral and multilateral.

AN INTERIM ASSESSMENT

It can be seen that there is a wide and growing range of inter-connecting networks in the area of European foreign policy, broadly conceived. This justifies the use of the plural in describing the *elites* which participate in policy-making and policy-shaping. There is a co-existence of national and transnational circuits which might lead some to believe in a renaissance of functionalism, and others to see an irredeemably fractured process, where even a consensual super-elite will find it impossible to cohere given the persistence of national political pressures.

What will be crucial in determining which of these two interpretations turns out to be most accurate is the relationship of the elites to the level of mass democracy. At present there is no real Europe-wide awareness of a single set of foreign policy dilemmas, except in the broadest terms, to do with undifferentiated worries about terrorism or climate change. The CFSP hardly figures on the horizon of most citizens even in integrationist-minded societies. Even less visible is any form of significant scrutiny and accountability for common European diplomacy; there is a huge gap – political and informational – between the national parliamentary processes and the increasingly complex, if often ad hoc, processes of foreign policy coordination. Thus when a crisis arises, national politics and institutions move into the vacant space.

If, somehow, Jürgen Habermas's 'European public space' were to come into being as the result of underlying cultural, demographic and cultural forces, then foreign policy would not be immune. Habermas, Derrida and others hoped that the great street demonstrations across Europe against the Iraq war in February 2003 would herald the opening up of this space. Instead, as Carl Henrik Frederiksson pointed out:

'his initiative appears to have been a failure in that respect. A broad, transnational discussion has been conspicuous by its absence. Instead we've been treated to a new demonstration of the way that public discourse falls hostage to national and linguistic divisions' (Frederiksson 2006).

For there are many lines of serious fracture in the politics of foreign policy in Europe – between big and small states, given the disproportionate influence of the 'big

three'; between old and new Member States (very evident during the Iraq debate itself); between interventionists and the pacifically-inclined; between south and east – to say nothing of the complications which every change of government in almost every state brings about for attempts at consensus-building.

Nonetheless, the persistent talk over 30 years now of a *communauté de vues*, and an *acquis politique* (perhaps no accident that these are both French/Belgian terms!) indicates that something is going on in terms of a set of distinctive attitudes and interests being identified as Europe's own. For all the internal divisions, most Europeans (and probably most Americans) feel that there are contrasts between the two sides of the Atlantic in terms of general attitudes towards international relations. How could it be otherwise, between the inhabitants of an hegemonic superpower, and those of a loose association of smaller states whose historical moment seems to have passed? If this is the case then it falls to the elites to articulate such feelings and to translate them into sustainable policies. Given the evolving and multi-layered nature of Europe's polity, this cannot be done by the relatively narrow and technical elite of the European Union alone. It must be the business of the overlapping but also competing elites of wider Europe, in which non-Europeans can easily dabble. In this uncertain environment leadership is at a premium, and can come from any direction, as the unpredicted impact of individuals like Robert Cooper, Marri Ahtisaari or Bernard Kouchner indicates. It involves the challenge of combining soft power with a small but growing hard power capability (Nye 2008). The European foreign policy elite is a work in progress, yet one of considerable significance. Since elites and citizens are bound in a relationship of mutual dependence, the evolving character of both the EU and of international order means that their relationship will have wide repercussions.

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