

What the EU can learn from Solana's legacy

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Foreign policy chief's complex but disappointing legacy.

When Javier Solana hands over the reins of the European Union's foreign policy to Catherine Ashton next week, he will be leaving behind a complex but ultimately disappointing legacy. A decade in office has reduced this mercurial character from a strategic thinker to an administrator of small-scale missions scattered across the world.

The transformation, though gradual, can be dated to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Solana devoted the period 1999-2003 to laying the institutional groundwork for the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The period from 2003 to the present has been taken up with running the ESDP and its field missions (some 23 to date). He has retreated from engagement on the big diplomatic questions of the day, with the partial exception of Iran.

Initially, Solana carved out for himself a position that was far more powerful than foreseen in the EU's Treaty of Amsterdam. Putting to use the skills – and the contacts – acquired in long years as a cabinet minister in Spain and then as NATO's secretary-general, he established a small but influential policy apparatus in the secretariat of the Council of Ministers that functioned as a sort of EU brains trust for strategic thinking.

But the unhappy experience of 2003 showed up the limitations of his office. The vicious battles between the EU's member states over Iraq made it impossible to form a united EU policy. Solana withdrew from the big questions and shrewdly focused on those where he felt the EU could make a difference – missions, often limited in scope and time, in the western Balkans, in Africa, but also in Aceh (Indonesia) and Georgia.

Many mistakes were made in these missions and many were simply NATO or United Nations operations re-branded, taken over by the EU once they were no longer dangerous. This smacked of political opportunism, even showmanship. The Georgia mission, deployed with admirable speed and efficiency, is hobbled by Russia's non-compliance with the terms of an EU-brokered ceasefire – and there is not a thing the EU could do about it even if it wanted to. The judicial mission in Kosovo suffers from many of the same problems that affected its UN precursor.

Those critics who say that there is no strategic vision behind the EU's missions in Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans are right – but they also miss the point. These missions have been designed with a focus on delivery, as modest interventions that save lives but do not address the underlying political conflicts. The EU cannot tackle Darfur, Solana's officials say, but it can

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help protect Darfuri refugees in Chad. It cannot resolve the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, but it can contribute to improved policing in the West Bank. Exceptions to this approach have been Aceh and Macedonia, where Solana's diplomacy was instrumental in averting more serious bloodshed; his diplomacy on Iran's nuclear ambitions was also patient and methodical, if unsuccessful.

Solana himself has at times been exasperating. He stubbornly stuck to a particular script on Bosnia and Herzegovina, undermining his own special envoys in the process. He sounded far more influential on the Middle East than he actually was. But the biggest disappointment is not of Solana's making. It is the stark discrepancy between the EU's stated ambition to be a force for good in the world and its actual policies. Solana's decade demonstrates that personality matters, as do institutions. But neither will make up for a lack of political will on the part of member states.

Ashton will benefit from something Solana never had – treaty-based authority, including a right of initiative and a foothold in the European Commission, plus much more staff and money. The pity is that Solana was neither given adequate tools nor political backing. The member states – and Ashton – should reflect on his record and resolve to exploit the opportunities offered by the Lisbon treaty to close the gap between ambition and achievement.