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# Towards a Comprehensive Approach: The EEAS Crisis Response System

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**In recent years, the European Union (EU) has become more prominent and effective as a crisis manager. This paper argues that the idea of the *Comprehensive Approach* and the European External Action Service (EEAS) institutional project have been substantially shaped by High Representative Ashton. A focus on the newly created Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department within the EEAS is employed for analysing the recent post-Lisbon changes in the EU crisis management architecture. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with EU and national officials, the paper contemplates the role for the EU in complex crises, in particular the potential contribution of the EU's Crisis Response System.**

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has become a more prominent actor in the international realm of crisis management (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2013). Member states acknowledge – on paper, at least – that they must increase their mutual cooperation capabilities given the rising number of transboundary crises (Ansell, Boin, & Keller, 2010).

The coherence and coordination of EU's external action in the field of crisis management is the central aim of External Action Service's Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department (CR&OC), which was created by High Representative Ashton at the end of 2010. This department was developed as one of the key foreign policy innovations of the Lisbon Treaty. To assure an effective horizontal *Comprehensive Approach* (Sherriff, 2013; Wollard, 2013) in responding to natural and man-made crises, the involvement of member states and ensuring the information flow between them, as well as between member states and EU institutions, is considered crucial. Different instruments have already been put in place or revised to accomplish better coordination: the EU Crisis Platform,

the EU Situation Room, and the EU Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) arrangements.

This paper outlines the recent changes in EU's capacity to respond to an international crisis and discusses remaining obstacles in achieving a *Comprehensive Approach*. Drawing on interviews with EU and national officials, the paper tackles the core question of whether those changes fundamentally improve EU's capacity and impact as a crisis management actor, especially in the short run. I analyse what I consider to be potentially far-reaching post-Lisbon transformations that have taken place – particularly since the appointment of Catherine Ashton as the EU's first High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) – within the EU's core institutions that deal with international crisis management and the corresponding policies.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the paper briefly outlines the concept of 'complex crisis' as defined by the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as the concept of 'crisis response'. Thereafter, the paper provides an overview of the influence of HR/VP Ashton in shaping the *Comprehensive*

*Approach*, with a particular focus on the EU's response to the Haiti earthquake in 2010. The following section outlines the post-Lisbon changes and pays special attention to the creation of the new crisis response structures in the EEAS and their (potential) role in promoting a *Comprehensive Approach* among the EU institutions involved. This section addresses the state level and the revision of instruments such as the IPCR, the former Crisis Coordination Arrangements (CCA), and the Solidarity Clause. It also looks at the creation of the CR&OC and the Crisis Platform, which were not only designed to equip the EU with a more agile instrument for reacting to crises within a very short time-frame, but have also been implemented to fulfil a major coordinating role of all foreign policy tools available to the EEAS and the EU.

## 2. Complex crises and the concept of crisis response in the EU

There is no common agreement concerning what the EU should or does consider as a 'crisis' (Boin et al., 2013). This lack of agreement creates many misunderstandings, inefficiencies, and duplications in the EU response to crises. As officials from different EU institutions have different definitions of what constitutes a crisis scenario for the EU, they also have different ideas on how these crises should be tackled and who should act.

The definition of an EU crisis is closely linked to and dependent on the nature of the EU. The EU is not a nation state, for which a crisis is commonly defined as an urgent threat to core societal values that necessitates immediate action by political actors (Rosenthal, Charles, & 't Hart, 1989; Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). The very definition of the societal values under threat is not agreed upon in the EU, nor is it clear which political actors should play a key role in the management of such crises: is it the member states and the General Secretariat of the Council, the President of the Commission, or the HR/VP?

Nevertheless, the EU has made remarkable advances in its evolution as a crisis manager. These include the launching of the Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1993, followed by the creation and operationalization of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), formerly the European Security and Defence Policy, in 1999 and from 2003 onwards (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Howorth, 2005). At the same time, the Commission has developed the EU's capacities to respond to natural and man-made disasters – in particular through the creation of the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) in 1992. With the innovations brought by the Lisbon Treaty, HR/VP Ashton would like the EU now to be considered a more visible and active player in the field of crisis response<sup>1</sup>.

New players and institutions are becoming more involved in the response to 'complex crises', which comprises the full spectrum of man-made and natural disasters. Under the initiative of the CR&OC and in the framework of recent developments within the EEAS, a new definition of crisis has been developed.

The idea of the EU's crisis response, as defined by the EEAS, refers to the 'immediate mobilization of EEAS resources to deal with the consequences of a crisis caused by political or armed conflict, technological incidents or man-made and natural disasters'<sup>2</sup>. This is indeed a very broad, all-encompassing definition (with potentially far-reaching implications for other EU institutions), but the concept of crisis response is part of the EU's 'wider efforts to preserve peace, prevent conflict and strengthen international security and to help address man-made and natural disasters'<sup>3</sup>. In other words, according to an EEAS senior official, crisis response is intended to become the EU's overarching security and emergency approach, which, if fully implemented, would fundamentally change the face and nature of the EU as an international actor and immediate response actor.

In this context, the new EEAS 'Crisis Response System' seems to be designed to occupy a central position in terms of coordinating power and significance in the EU's evolution as an international crisis management actor. If one can argue that the Crisis Response System is an important step towards a *Comprehensive Approach*, it is indeed important to underline that the EEAS' emphasis on crisis response is met with some resistance at the EU level. On the one hand, looking at the changes in the EEAS over time<sup>4</sup> and the limited innovations in CSDP structures, there is the perception that the attention on crisis response approach is pushing CSDP away from the HR/VP's core focus.

On the other hand, officials from DG ECHO argue that CR&OC is stepping on the DG ECHO's territory.<sup>5</sup> It is understandable that ECHO officials are puzzled by recent developments, considering that the very term 'crisis response' emerged from the humanitarian department to denote the mobilization of resources and rapid delivery of humanitarian aid and assistance (International Crisis Group, 2001). The bridging and integration of these institutional rivalries will eventually determine the success or failure of the latest push for a 'truly' *Comprehensive Approach*.

## 3. The comprehensive crisis response: Haiti and Ashton

Baroness Ashton – like Javier Solana before – has made substantial contributions to shaping the EU's *Comprehensive Approach*; one of her institutional priorities was to build the EEAS, alongside the creation of integrated

crisis response structures. Ashton's emphasis is on conflict prevention and the strengthening of EU mediation capacities and integrated crisis response. Her leadership style can be described as 'delegative leadership', as illustrated by the appointment in 2010 of Agostino Miozzo for the newly created position of Managing Director of the CR&CO and by the level of autonomy he received in setting up the new department (Tercovich & Koops, 2014).

The CR&OC ensures not only overall coordination of all of EU security, crisis response, and crisis management tools, but also functions as a clearing house and crisis actor of first resort, being able to deploy early warning capabilities. The choice of the new Managing Director, directly reporting to Ashton in close cooperation with EEAS Secretary-General Vimont, was not an arbitrary one. Miozzo, a medical doctor by training with a 30-year career in various humanitarian and crisis response assignments, coordinated Italy's response to the Haiti earthquake in 2010 as Director of the Italian Civil Protection Department. By appointing Miozzo, Ashton hoped to fill what she perceived to be a fundamental gap in the EU's crisis management structures.<sup>6</sup>

In what we can consider as a case of mimetic *institutional isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the EU's evolution as a security actor, Miozzo set out to replicate the set-up of the Italian Civil Protection Department and use that model for the new CR&OC within the EEAS. This explains the Managing Director's vision for overall EU coordination, as in the Italian case the Director of the Civilian Protection Department acts under the direct authority of the Prime Minister with wide-ranging powers to coordinate all relevant national actors (emergency services, police, humanitarian services, and the military) in times of crisis and disaster.

Yet, any attempts to replicate such a set-up and far-reaching coordinating powers within the highly politically contested bureaucratic space of the EEAS are bound to run into problems. The effectiveness of the *Comprehensive Approach* will depend on the cooperation of other EU players as well as the integrative leadership of Miozzo. The *Ashtonization* of the EU – i.e., putting an emphasis on the promotion of a *Comprehensive Approach*, the advancement of coordinated crisis response, and early warning as well as conflict prevention and mediation, and a de-emphasizing of the CSDP – could have far-reaching implications for the nature of the EEAS and EU, and are closely linked to the success or failure of the new institutional instruments associated with the CR&OC.

Baroness Ashton's priorities for the EU's development in terms of the *Comprehensive Approach* have been further influenced by the EU's limited response to the Haiti earthquake in January 2010. The international

reaction to the Haiti earthquake has been heavily criticized for lack of a coherent approach (OECD, 2011). Moreover, the Haiti case also generated personal attacks on Ashton herself by a wide range of political actors and the British media in particular (Booker, 2010). At the time, Ashton had been in office for less than a month and was criticized for her leadership inexperience and absence during the crisis, while the EU was being attacked for its lacking visibility throughout the Haiti crisis.

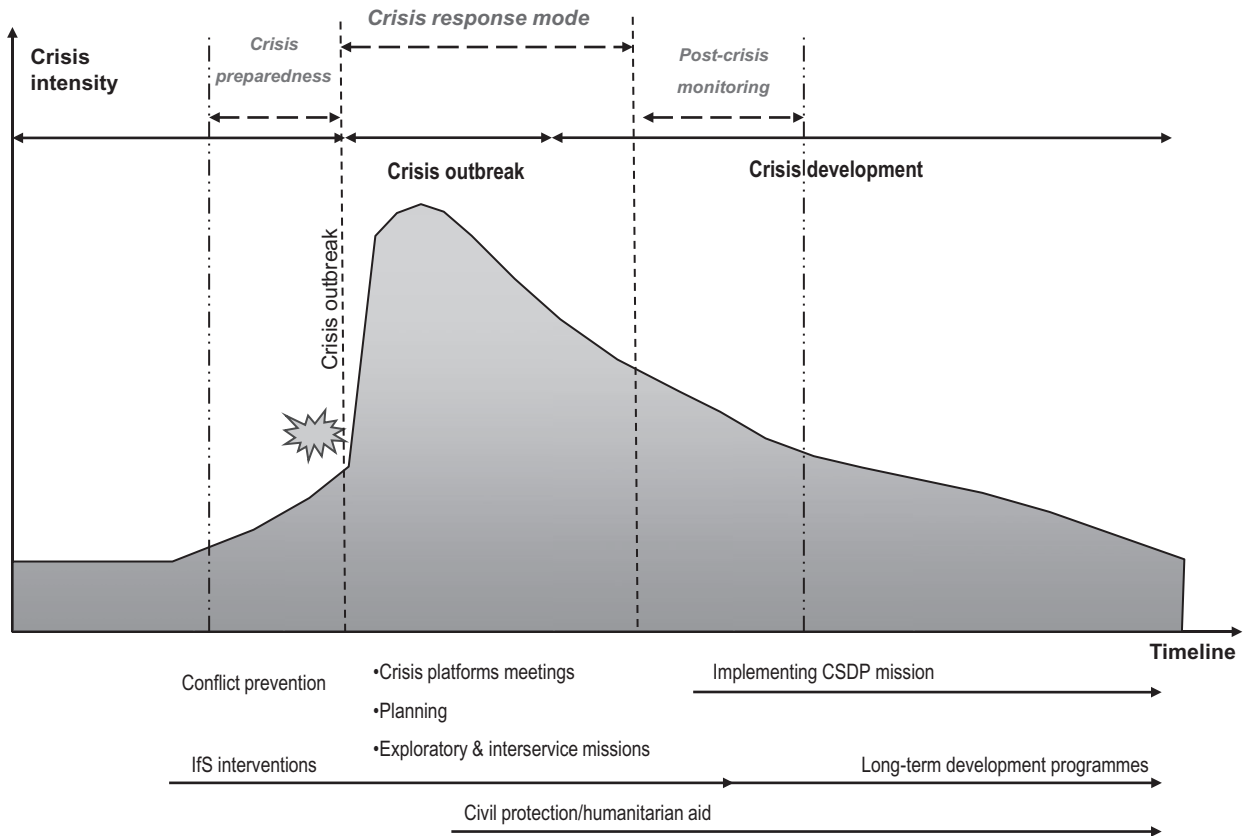
Indeed, the EU's response in Haiti was heavily fragmented and delayed. Moreover, Haiti also highlighted the limits of the CSDP (Tercovich et al., 2014). Ashton decided that more rapidly deployable capacities were needed within the EEAS to address similar crises in the future. For this reason, one can say that Haiti served as an important catalyst for Ashton's prioritization of the build-up of integrated crisis response mechanisms. With the Haiti experience, Ashton identified a core gap in the EEAS and within the EU's international crisis management capabilities, and therefore appointed Agostino Miozzo (December 2010) to lead the new CR&OC.

#### 4. What's new: the CR&OC department

The CR&OC was not foreseen in the Lisbon Treaty or outlined in the original blueprint of the EEAS, but was put in place by the newly appointed Managing Director under the recommendation of HR/VP Ashton. During the Munich Security Conference in February 2010, she stated that the EEAS had a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity to build something new' and she insisted on ensuring 'that we have the right tools, people and systems in place – so that we can respond quickly and more effectively' (Ashton, 2010). This involved 'develop[ing] extra capabilities for modern crisis management' that go beyond the CSDP. This speech at the Munich Security Conference was influenced by the lessons learned from Haiti. The plan for setting up new institutional structures leading to a more integrated crisis response capacity brings together all relevant Council and Commission institutions dealing with crisis management and crisis response.

##### 4.1. The EEAS Crisis Response System

The official core aim of the Crisis Response System is to 'ensure coherence between various aspects of crisis response and management measures, particularly in the security, political, diplomatic, consular, humanitarian, developmental, space related, environmental, and corporate fields . . . It aims to coordinate and facilitate rapid decision-making during times of crisis, as well as to improve preparedness for potential crises and also



**Figure 1.** The crisis cycle and examples of EU crisis response and management components (Source: EEAS Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department).

reduce vulnerability to future crises through advanced planning and appropriate threat and risk assessment methodologies and measures'.<sup>7</sup> The day-to-day management of these structures is carried out by the CR&OC, chaired by the Managing Director Agostino Miozzo. Under the overall authority of the EEAS 'Crisis Management Board', chaired by Ashton or Vimont and bringing together all senior EEAS officials who deal with crisis response and management, including CSDP institutions and geographical desks, the CR&OC is supposed to monitor and react to all phases of the 'Crisis Cycle' (see Figure 1) by identifying the appropriate tools and instruments available at the EU level.<sup>8</sup> I will discuss two important instruments: the Situation Room and the Crisis Platform.

#### 4.1.1. The EU situation room

The CR&OC is supported by a civil-military 'EU Situation Room' staffed by approximately 30 officers. The Situation Room was formally established on 15 June 2010 by merging elements of the EU Situation Centre, the watch-keeping capability, the former Commission RELEX Crisis Room, and the CCA team.

The aim of the Situation Room is to act as the EEAS switchboard for all information provided by EU actors,

including EU delegations, member states, EU CSDP operations, and missions as well as information coming from other international organizations.<sup>9</sup> To what extent this ambitious agenda will actually be implemented in practice remains to be seen, yet a good level of integration from previously autonomous departments dealing with situational awareness and crisis information analysis has already taken place.

However, interinstitutional frictions are expected to continue between the new situation room and ECHO's European Emergency Response Centre, which has been similarly tasked with providing analysis on natural disasters, and with coordinating communication between national crisis rooms, as well as with the new IPCR arrangements, previously the CCA, now reassigned to the General Secretariat of the Council.

The aim of the Civil Protection is 'to protect people, their environment, property and cultural heritage in the event of major natural or man-made disasters occurring both inside and outside the EU'.<sup>10</sup> The request for assistance can come from any country (inside or outside the EU) affected by a disaster. This protection is basically a coordination of member state capacities. The mechanism is similar to what the Consular Crisis Management Division (the CR&OC) does via the CoOI (Consular OnLine) instrument, in terms of coordinating

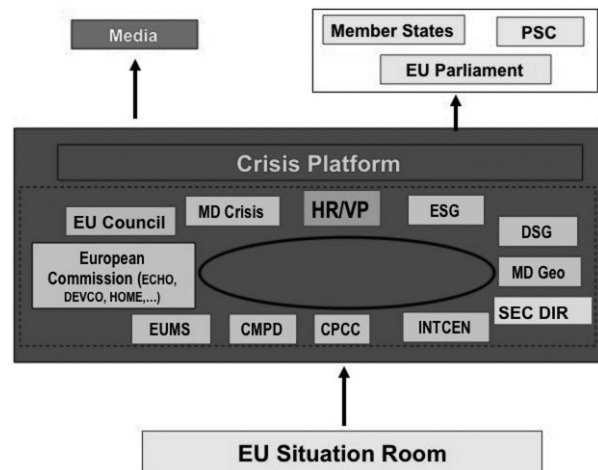
member states. Despite the fact that the mandates are different, with civil protection dealing with emergency and disaster relief, and consular affairs dealing with citizens during crisis situations where consular assistance might be needed (i.e., coordination of the evacuation operation of EU citizens during the South Sudan crisis), both are *de facto* coordinating the responses of member states.

One might argue that the Emergency Response Centre (DG ECHO) has the financial capacity to become the single point of contact of the EU; one may argue that the Civil Protection Mechanism should be included in the mandate of the EEAS. Then there is the 'Secure Zone' project that DG HOME is currently developing, which also includes an analytical crisis/disaster response capabilities dimension. In June 2013, HR/VP Ashton proposed to 'co-locate the 24/7 EEAS situation room with the newly created Commission of a 24/7 Emergency Response Centre to create a single EU Crisis Response Centre, better using EU resources' (EEAS, 2013, p. 16). But a merger between these instruments is unlikely to occur.

#### 4.1.2. The Crisis Platform

The EEAS Crisis Platform is a flexible and agile institutional coordination arrangement activated during the outbreak of an acute crisis in order to coordinate all relevant EU actors and to provide 'a clear political or strategic objective for the management of a given crisis, including guidelines and assessment of constraints to, and needs for, planning'.<sup>11</sup> The platform can be 'activated', convened, and chaired either by the HR/VP, the EEAS Executive Secretary-General, or the CR&OC Managing Director. In times of acute crisis, it brings together all major actors across Council and Commission institutions dealing with security-related policies (see Figure 2), in particular CSDP institutions, such as the EU Military Staff, the Crisis Management Planning Directorate, the Civilian Planning Conduct and Capability as well as EEAS geographical desks and Commission-led institutions, such as ECHO, DG Development and Cooperation and DG HOME. This cooperation represents the most far-reaching institutionalized tool for interinstitutional coordination and information exchange; it also places the CR&OC and EEAS firmly at the forefront of the *Comprehensive Approach*.

The first time these new structures were activated was during the Libyan crisis in 2011. From March to October 2011, the Crisis Platform convened for a total of 14 meetings. The platform dealt with political issues, military situations, humanitarian concerns, and security issues. Operational conclusions were agreed upon and later announced via the Crisis Platform Report. The main achievement of the platform was the opening of a first-ever EU Delegation to Libya in Benghazi in May



**Figure 2.** The Crisis Platform (Source: EEAS Crisis Response and Operational Coordination Department).

2011. On 21 May 2011, the HR/VP inaugurated the EU office in Benghazi. One EEAS official commented on the opening that 'establishing a permanent presence on the ground sent a very strong message of support to the transitional authorities and to the local population. It not only enhanced the EU's visibility and diplomatic presence, but also helped to restore vital flows of information between Libya and Brussels'.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, at the end of August 2011, a week after the fall of the Libyan capital, the EEAS established a permanent presence in Tripoli. A small team of experts was deployed to follow developments on the ground and to communicate with transitional authorities. Experts from the EEAS, Commission, and Member States were sent out on a rotating basis, with the CR&OC department seeking to facilitate coherence. The main tasks of the EU offices/delegation in Libya during this phase was to work with local authorities, civil society, and stakeholders, to provide information to EEAS headquarters, to support the implementation of EU projects, and to provide coordination for member states on the ground.<sup>13</sup> While these activities have been criticized by some observers as a meagre substitute for a full-fledged CSDP operation, it is important not to underestimate the impact of the EEAS 'diplomatic crisis response' between March and August 2011, as well as its meaning in terms of the *Comprehensive Approach*.

The rapid establishment of an EU presence on the ground not only allowed the EU to establish a visible presence in Libya but also provided a platform for long-term post-crisis engagement.<sup>14</sup> The various needs-assessment missions provided important input for EU's long-term projects in the areas of border security, civil society, empowerment of women, and electoral support.

The EEAS activity also highlighted some limits of the EU's overall ability to promote the comprehensive crisis response approach with its new CR&OC institutions and tools. Immediately after the opening of the EU delegation in Tripoli, the lead reverted from the CR&OC department to the EEAS geographical desks, resulting once again in a fragmented approach.<sup>15</sup> The internal disarray of EU member states over the potential CSDP mission and the eventual contribution under NATO added to the disarray. While some success can be highlighted in the first operationalization of the EEAS' new crisis response institutions, there is still some ways to go in terms of institutional coordination and comprehensive operationalization (Tercovich et al., 2014).

*4.1.3. The integrated political crisis response arrangements* Alongside the evolution of the crisis response structures, the EU brings forth another relevant initiative that is important to discuss: the creation of the EU IPCR arrangements. Between 2011 and 2012, numerous member states expressed the need for an Integrated Situational Awareness and support analysis capability at the EU level, as well as more regular information sharing between National Crisis Coordination Centres and involved EU actors.<sup>16</sup> Crises like H1N1 Influenza and the Icelandic Volcanic Ash had demonstrated the need for more coordinated action at both the EU and national levels.

The IPCR arrangements replaced the CCA, which were created in 2006 (Larsson, 2009). The CCA were meant as an instrument to provide the Presidency and the Council with the necessary tools to support political coordination and prepare policy options for the Council decision-making during crisis. The CCA Alert Mode was first activated during the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, when the CCA webpage was used for information exchange. The webpage was also used in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake in January 2010 and during the outbreak of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull and the ensuing problems with the ash cloud in April 2010.

On 25 June 2013, the CCA was revised and renamed IPCR in order to adhere to the post-Lisbon framework (European Union, 2013). According to the IPCR, similar to the CCA before it, in the occurrence of a crisis, coordination is carried out by the EU Presidency supported by the General Secretariat of the Council, the EEAS, and the Commission. The IPCR is based on the *subsidiarity* principle and the idea that in crisis situations, the EU Presidency has a central role to play in political coordination. In principle, the EU Presidency should consult other member states, especially the affected ones. The EU Presidency proposes possible measures to be taken, which are then discussed in the COREPER.

After the creation of the CR&OC, the CCA unit was moved from the Council Secretariat to Miozzo's new unit, under the EU Situation Room. After June 2013, this unit has been divided again between the General Secretariat of the Council and the EEAS.<sup>17</sup> This decision seems the result of a battle between the two institutions, rather than a step forward in the framework of the *Comprehensive Approach*. As part of the CR&OC, the former CCA team is building a network of 'single point of contact at national level', a task that faces multiple difficulties. In particular, the request coming from member states to provide different centres for various crises is a proposal that conflicts with the idea of having a 'single point of contact' per member state to deal with during a crisis.

Moreover, questions still remain on who is the EU's single point of contact at a political level, meaning who is the final actor responsible for the activation. Looking at the Lisbon Treaty, HR/VP Ashton seems to be the one responsible for external crises, but if the crisis is an internal or a transboundary one, who is responsible at the Commission level? Additionally, what is the role of the General Secretariat of the Council? Only at the Commission level, there are different actors for different crises [i.e., the Emergency Response Centre (DG ECHO), the Health Operation Facility (DG SANCO), and the Strategic Analysis and Response Capability (DG HOME)], but no clarity as to who is responsible to activate one or the other instrument.

## 5. Conclusions

The EU's approach to responding to man-made and natural crises has undergone serious institutional change. There are positive signals indicating that the EU is moving towards a *Comprehensive Approach* to complex crisis response. But obstacles still remain.

Since 2010, diplomatic tools and comprehensive crisis response mechanisms have been emphasized. The creation of the CR&OC department and the first steps taken since the crisis in Libya have shown a speed-up of decision-making processes. Having a single point of contact and coordination is undoubtedly a key element to improve effectiveness and coordination in times of crisis. Moreover, one can observe improvement in the level of integration of the departments dealing with information sharing within the Situation Room. The creation of the Crisis Platform, as an interinstitutional coordination tool that welcomes all actors at the EU level, including DG ECHO, is probably the most far-reaching improvement. So far, there are no other instruments that give representatives coming from different institutions the opportunity to share and discuss the situation during a crisis.

The reorganization of crisis management and crisis response structures promoted by HR/VP Ashton could

have far-reaching consequences, but obstacles still remain. First of all, it is too early to predict to what extent these changes will be effective and sustainable in the long run. While individual actors, such as the CR&OC's Managing Director and Ashton herself, have introduced important changes, it is so far unclear to what extent these developments will survive the tenure of these office-holders. Moreover, persistent rivalries and turf wars between the major crisis management and crisis response institutions within the EU give rise to competition for resources and competences.

The EEAS as a new institution still needs to confirm its position within the EU structures of crisis response/management. The emphasis on 'crisis response' is still perceived in competition with the 'crisis management' competence of the CSDP and the humanitarian/civil protection response led by DG ECHO. Interinstitutional tensions will probably continue until a clear, comprehensive system with precise competences and a chain of command will be agreed upon by all the actors involved (EEAS, EU Commission, and the General Secretariat of the EU Council).

To begin with, EU institutions and actors need to agree on a clear definition about key terms such as 'complex crisis' and 'crisis response' (Boin & Ekengren, 2009). This seems to be the only way to overcome the institutional rivalries that will determine the success or failure of the *Comprehensive Approach*. EU member states also need to be involved in the discussion. As the big elephant in the room, any coordination mechanism should be discussed and agreed among them. Nevertheless, for the academic, conceptual, and policy-oriented study of the EU as an international crisis manager, interesting times and fundamental questions lie ahead.

## Notes

1. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
2. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
3. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
4. EEAS Graphic Presentations, 2012, 2013, 2014.
5. Interview with DG ECHO official, Civil Protection department, Brussels, July 2012.
6. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
7. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
8. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
9. Interview with EEAS official, EU Situation Room, Brussels, July 2012 and January 2014.
10. See DG ECHO (2012).
11. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
12. Interview with EEAS official, EU Situation Room, Brussels, July 2012 and January 2014.
13. Interview with EEAS official deployed to Libya, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
14. Interview with EEAS official deployed to Libya, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
15. Interview with EEAS senior official, EU crisis response and operational coordination department, Brussels, July 2012.
16. Interview with EEAS official, EU Situation Room, Brussels, July 2012 and January 2014.
17. Interview with EEAS official, EU Situation Room, Brussels, July 2012 and January 2014.

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