



ANNUAL HIGH-LEVEL EU DIPLOMACY LECTURE



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EU INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES

The EU and the United Nations: Multilateral Diplomacy in Practice

Ambassador Thomas MAYR-HARTING, European External Action Service, former Head of the EU Delegation to the United Nations in New York (2011-15), 29 October 2015

This “EU Diplomacy Lecture” was the second event in the annual series of high-level lectures organised by the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies of the College of Europe in Bruges.



Rector Jörg Monar welcomed the audience and introduced the high-level speaker of the second annual high-level “EU Diplomacy Lecture”, Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting. The Rector set the frame of the Lecture by pointing out that although the European Union (EU) is sometimes criticised for lack of progress in

becoming a cohesive actor in international affairs, a lot has changed over recent years, in particular with the reforms introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon.

Ambassador Mayr-Harting opened his lecture by mentioning his special relationship with the College of Europe, where he was a student himself in 1977-1978 (Karl Renner

promotion), and where he is also a Visiting Professor. He pointed to the fact that the European Union and the United Nations (UN) share the same values. It is not very well known that the EU and its Member States are the single largest financial contributor to the UN system. They fund around 35% of the UN regular budget – more than the share of 22% of the United States. They contribute a similar share to the UN peacekeeping operations. The European Commission alone provided in 2014 more than \$1.5 billion to UN external assistance programmes and projects.

Ambassador Mayr-Harting reflected as well on the growth of the EU Delegation. The European Commission's original information office in New York officially became a Delegation to the UN in 1974, when the European Community was granted observer status at the General Assembly. In 1994 an EU Council Liaison Office was established as well to serve as a support structure for the High Representative for the Common and Foreign Security Policy. Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting opined that the Lisbon Treaty has had no greater effect on EU Delegations worldwide than in New York. When he recently left the EU Delegation, there were 60 members of staff, including 30 diplomats, and each year, the Delegation hosts more than 1,300 coordination meetings with the EU Member States to promote a more coherent decision-making process.



Within the UN Security Council France and the United Kingdom have a permanent seat, while other EU countries may be represented on a temporary basis. The UN Regional Groups system of allocation can bring the number of European countries up to five. The value of permanence is of the essence within the UN system, and nowhere does it transpire more clearly than in the Security Council. Permanence allows to develop a knowledge about how things work, an institutional memory, which is very useful in an environment where so much is regulated by precedent. Indeed, the Security Council is still operating under provisional rules of procedure.

However, the EU is not alone in the world and must search support from the other UN members. In order to leverage some political weight, the EU has to act as a group. At the UN, the EU is often regarded as a 'moderating voice of the North', for instance balancing the 'Group of 77'. On 3 May 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution A/65/276 upgrading the status of the European Union's representation to

the status of an enhanced observer. This resolution allows EU representatives to present common positions to the General Assembly among the major groups, ahead of the members and other observers. Ambassador Mayr-Harting compared this to the field of ice skating where a distinction is made between the obligatory programme and the artistic programme: the EU does the obligatory programme which gives its Member States more time to focus on the artistic programme.



While it should be a logical thing now for the EU to speak with one voice, this is not always the case. For example, Ambassador Mayr-Harting explained that the EU Delegation to the UN does not coordinate on candidates for positions in the UN system, where EU Member States often compete, nor on nuclear disarmament or decolonisation (two European states disagreeing on the status of Gibraltar). However, a lot has been achieved in the last four years. The EU Delegation to the UN coordinated on not recognising the annexation of Ukraine, on issues of international peace and security (for instance on the Horn of Africa or Bosnia), on human rights (Burma, Myanmar, North Korea) and LGBT rights, or humanitarian support (Syria). There is also coordination on the budget of the UN despite the fact that this remains a national competence of the Member States.

In the UN Security Council, the focus is on concertation, not coordination. Nonetheless, cooperation amongst EU Member States has increased exponentially. As a former representative of Austria in the Security Council, Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting admitted that he sometimes found it difficult to know what was going on. A lot of things were 'pre-cooked' by the permanent members, and the representatives of the non-permanent members were often just confronted with a *fait accompli* awaiting a stamp of approval. In those times, it was crucial to get the British and French ambassadors to share their information and it is still vital today to get these countries to voice and frame concerns through an EU perspective. He also pointed out that the High Representative has been speaking several times at the UN Security Council.



Finally, one should understand the work of the EU Delegation to the UN as one of intergovernmental coordination led by the Head of the Delegation. As a non-member of the UN, the Delegation of the EU cannot vote in New York, even in areas of EU competence. The UN remains after all a state-centred system. The lecture by Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting was followed by a stimulating question and answer session.

About the Speaker

Ambassador Thomas Mayr-Harting was from October 2011 to October 2015 the Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations in New York. He recently returned to the EEAS headquarters in Brussels. Before assuming the position of EU Ambassador to the UN, he served as Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations. In 2009 and 2010 he represented Austria on the UN Security Council, and in November 2009 he was President of the Security Council. He was also one of the Vice-Presidents of the 66th UN General Assembly.

Thomas Mayr-Harting joined the Austrian diplomatic service in 1979. In the course of his career he has worked, inter alia, at the Austrian Mission to the European Communities in Brussels, the Austrian Embassy in Moscow, the Private Office of the Austrian Foreign Minister and as Director for Security Policy and Policy Planning. Between 2003 and 2008 Thomas Mayr-Harting served as Director General for Political Affairs in the Foreign Ministry of Austria. From 1999 to 2003 he was Austrian Ambassador to Belgium and Head of the Austrian Mission to NATO.

Thomas Mayr-Harting studied law at the University of Vienna. He is also an alumnus of the College of Europe (Promotion Karl Renner), where he teaches as a Visiting Professor. In 1978, he was awarded the Diploma of The Hague Academy of International Law.