Charting the EU Course

A Conversation with Baroness Catherine Ashton

FLETCHER FORUM: You’ve spoken about Europe’s journey toward speaking with a single voice and noted that your role as the first high representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy is to establish a tailwind and set a good course for the future. How do you plan to catalyze that tailwind?

BARONESS CATHERINE ASHTON: There are three big priorities I’ve set for myself. The first one is to create this new diplomatic service that is genuinely “Europe on the ground”—with economics meeting politics, and working with third countries to develop our unique approach to each

Catherine Ashton was elected national treasurer of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1982, and became vice-chair shortly thereafter. From 1979 to 1981 Ashton worked as Business Manager of the Coverdale Organization. She was director of Business in the Community from 1983–1989, in which time she founded the Employers’ Forum on Disability, Opportunity Now, and the Windsor Fellowship. She chaired the Health Authority in Hertfordshire from 1998 to 2001 and later became vice president of the National Council for One Parent Families. From 2001 to 2006 Ashton was minister of the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Constitutional Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice. In 2006, she became a privy councilor and was elected lord president of the Council in 2007, as well as leader of the House of Lords. Ashton became the UK’s European commissioner in Brussels in 2008, before her election as vice president in 2009. She was appointed the EU’s first high representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy in 2009.
one, although with common threads running through our policies. These include the thread of human rights, which I’ve described as a silver thread. Of the economic issues, some countries are focused on development, some are focused on trade, some are focused on climate change, but all are focused on the political realm.

Number two, I think the world will judge us on what we do with our neighborhood. Therefore, Europe is actively engaged with partners like the United States in our neighborhood to try to resolve problems and take countries in our neighborhood forward.

Thirdly, we need to sort out our strategic partnerships or relationships with some of the big players in the world with whom we need strong relationships, either because of the importance of our bilateral relations, or because together we can better solve problems and prevent conflict in the world.

FORUM: How do you envision the ideal U.S.-EU relationship in a post-Lisbon world? Do you feel the United States counts as one of the “strategic partnerships” you have mentioned, or do you count the relationship in a different category?

ASHTON: I consider the transatlantic relationship as the key strategic partnership. The EU and the United States have always been each other’s preferred partner and we are working consistently in this partnership on almost every single issue: in the Balkans, with Iran, and in the Middle East peace process, just to mention a few. We also share fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, and respect for rule of law.

In today’s world, no single country, not even the United States, can solve problems on its own.

FORUM: Negotiating the joint Serbian-EU UN General Assembly resolution in September was a huge diplomatic success for you. How do you envision the EU’s facilitative role in the upcoming dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina?

ASHTON: First of all, thank you. This was a good example of European action, because I was a bit of the icing on the cake. The cake was baked by lots of foreign ministers from all different parts of the European Union.
who spent the summer going to talk to Serbia and Kosovo to impress upon them the need to move forward. So, by the time I got into it, I had an absolutely clear position from all 27 of them; they’d negotiated so I could stand with that behind me and persuade the countries that it was important to move forward. So, it was a real team effort.

On the talks, we see these as being very, very low key. The prime minister and the president will choose people they trust to come along and set up the parameters of what they want to discuss, with the ability to bring in expertise if they need it later. The talks will be facilitated by the EU’s Robert Cooper, but with engagement from others as well. Not least, we’re looking at how best to engage the United States; it’s a subject for discussion how to take that forward.

Personalities are essential factors for success in any dialogue. In sensitive situations like this, just a handful of personalities can become key. For them, difficult compromises and steps forward require courage. Another reason why dealing with this dialogue is so difficult is the lack of trust on both sides; to establish at least enough trust to do business together has been my first objective. Diplomatic breakthroughs only become possible when key actors are willing to take risks because of the trust they have built with each other and, in this case, also towards the EU as a credible facilitator. This is what we have seen with the UN General Assembly resolution. It was a brave step forward by President Tadic, and an equally brave step by Prime Minister Thaci to support it. Now it is time for the next step.

The aim of EU facilitation is to create a space for functioning politics to work. However, functioning politics and regional cooperation is the one thing that foreigners cannot provide; only the locals can do that.

FORUM: You’ve mentioned before that the United States wants Europe to be Europe and to deal with issues in its neighborhood, of which the Balkans is a case in point, but of course the United States also wants to maintain a role in the upcoming talks. How do you see this role unfolding?

ASHTON: It’s crucial that the United States feel comfortable with where we’re going; if they’re not, that has enormous implications, not least in
Kosovo. So, the question becomes how best to ensure that, and how to engage the United States throughout the process in the right way. Serbia and Kosovo will have different perspectives on that, but I’m hoping we can find a common way. Secretary Clinton and I have discussed this and many other issues linked to the dialogue and, as I have previously said, it is crucial to ensure the right presence of the United States in the dialogue. We have agreed to work in full transparency with the United States on this issue.

FORUM: How do you see Kosovo President Sejdiu’s sudden resignation and subsequent early elections impacting the upcoming Pristina-Belgrade dialogue?

ASHTON: The resignation of the president and the early elections are internal developments in Kosovo, which form part of normal democratic life. There are procedures in place for these occasions and I am confident that Kosovo will follow the due political process.

I think that the developments in Kosovo might have some impact in terms of the timing of the beginning of the dialogue, but the dialogue is the right way forward and I believe it has the support of the wider political establishment in Kosovo. Despite these internal developments, we are engaging in consultations with our partners and the two sides to seek their views and to agree with them on how to proceed. The sooner the dialogue can start, the better, but we will of course also need to make sure that it is well prepared.

FORUM: What do you see as the key to shifting Kosovo’s and Serbia’s focus from a heavy past toward the long-term goal of EU integration?

ASHTON: The critical thing is that this is about their eventual future as part of the European Union. And the only way to get there is to start finding solutions to the problems. It’s also about the ordinary people of Kosovo and Serbia seeing that their leaders are actually trying to resolve these issues, and preventing any kind of conflict from taking place, however small. We said to them that we know that we also have to deliver on our side. So, for both of them to see that their past is being opened up, and as we get what I hope will be the early winds, they’ll see Europe also engage and say, actually this is about helping you move forward and we will do the same. We’ve promised them that we will make sure that the move forward is also reflected in how Europe reacts to them. It’s a journey, and we want to make sure that they’re not trying to make the journey without us, but that we’re actually engaging with them.

The aim of the dialogue offered by the EU is about removing obstacles on the path toward the EU. Therefore, it should really be seen in
the context of the integration of the whole region. And I see it as a real opportunity for both Belgrade and Pristina to move forward. The aim of the dialogue is to promote cooperation, achieve progress on the path to Europe, and improve the lives of people.

FORUM: What do you see as your greatest diplomatic success so far as the high representative, and, as a strong female role model, what advice might you offer to junior diplomats?

ASHTON: The greatest success for me has been developing relationships with the 27 foreign ministers and feeling that we’re a team, because everything else flows from that; Serbia discussions came from that. Our capacity to operate as a team is, for me, a real success. I wanted to make them feel that I added value.

You know, nothing’s easy; it’s easier sometimes to do nothing. So, doing something requires bravery, it requires creativity, and it requires risk. And I think that the best diplomats never lose their sense of humor and are willing to find creative ways through problems. That’s what you’ve got to be prepared to do, and to live with the consequences of it. But, in the world as I see it, there’s no place for people not prepared to try to be courageous, because that’s where success lies.
The EU Delegation Goes to Washington

A Conversation with Ambassador João Vale de Almeida

FLETCHER FORUM: The Lisbon Treaty introduced a Common Security and Foreign Policy (CSFP) that requires, at least in theory, member states to be on the same page. Are there any topics that you personally feel should be addressed but on which a lack of EU consensus handicaps action?

AMBASSADOR JOÃO VALE DE ALMEIDA: We don’t pretend that all member states have exactly the same positions about every issue of foreign policy. That is not in the cards. And we very much respect diversity, the fact that countries have different interests and come from different starting points, and the fact that they have different relationships with different parts of the world. For us, this is an asset, not a liability. But we aim at having a common message on as many issues as possible. That message is carried out by Cathy Ashton but also by each member state individually, which carries its own nuances, its own accents, but fundamentally projects...
the same message. The purpose is to enlarge the scope of issues on which we have a common position so that we are more effective on the world scene.

**FORUM:** You have said that it will be a process to move the European External Action Service (EEAS) toward full operating capacity, but in your mind, what needs to happen early on to bolster its credibility?

**VALE DE ALMEIDA:** I think we have already started, including what we’ve done in the delegations since the beginning of 2010. In Washington, I now represent the European Union—not only the European Commission—and I cooperate actively with my fellow ambassadors from the member states to project the image of the European Union. We are already changing on the ground.

High Representative Catherine Ashton has been extremely energetic in the months since her appointment to promote a new way of dealing with foreign policy in Europe. And the EEAS will be the last stage and the last element we add to this apparatus to make the EU work even better. It will not be effective immediately—we should not expect overnight to have a full-blown European diplomatic service, but it is a work in progress and will be launched with real determination by Cathy Ashton. I’m sure it will reach cruising speed very soon.

**FORUM:** As the first EU Ambassador to the United States, how have you approached building the EU’s reputation as a U.S. dialogue partner?

**VALE DE ALMEIDA:** My fundamental message to my U.S. partners is that the transatlantic relationship is by far the most solid and the most important bilateral relationship in the world, a relationship based on shared values and a strong fundamental belief in democratic government, the rule of law, human rights, and the market economy. The United States invests nine times as much in the Netherlands as it invests in China. The trade value between the United States and the EU is one billion dollars a day. These figures give you a dimension of the magnitude of the economic basis of this relationship. So, the first point is that the United States and European Union have a solid relationship based on common values and on strong economic interconnection.
The second message is that member states individually are important partners of the United States and so they should remain; the two levels, national and European, should be seen together. As the European Union deepens its integration process and becomes a bigger actor on the international scene, the more reasons there are for the United States to engage also with the European Union as a single entity.

The changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty—including the creation of new posts such as the permanent Council president and the high representative, as well as the new External Action Service and EU delegations that are replacing European Commission delegations—provide evidence that we are changing and becoming an even more reliable, credible, and effective partner of the United States.

FORUM: How has your reception been in Washington so far?

VALE DE ALMEDIA: Great. I have gotten an extremely warm welcome from all my American colleagues, including those in the State Department, the White House, Congress, and all the other governmental departments. I think there’s a genuine willingness and interest in cooperation with Europe. Of course, they expect us to be a real partner and to deliver. But that’s a challenge for us that I am willing to take on.

FORUM: What do you see as the ideal balance of U.S.-EU cooperation on global issues like climate change and terrorism, considering that other strategic EU partners may view the U.S. role less enthusiastically?

VALE DE ALMEIDA: Well, I don’t think that global challenges know borders or distinguish between countries. Global challenges are there, full stop. Be it climate change, terrorism, immigration, or scarcity of natural resources—these challenges are there and we have to tackle them. The question is whether we choose to tackle them separately or together. If we are to be more effective in our response to these challenges, we have to tackle them in partnership.

I think that both the EU and United States, as industrialized countries confronting competition from emerging powers, have fundamentally the same concerns. Both need to incorporate and integrate immigrant populations. The EU and United States also have common fiscal and budgetary concerns, with both fighting to come out of economic and financial crises. I think we have a lot in common, on top of the values and economic interconnection, to make the case for solid cooperation as we deal with global challenges.
I see a great potential for U.S.-EU relations and I think we can do much more not only in our bilateral cooperation, but also as global leaders. The world today requires stronger initiatives from both the European Union and the United States.

FORUM: Let’s turn to the Balkans. How do you envision the upcoming talks between Pristina and Belgrade?

VALE DE ALMEIDA: Well, I think the starting point is that Cathy Ashton was instrumental in creating the conditions for a consensual resolution in the United Nations context; she was also influential in creating the conditions for Kosovo and Serbia to start talking. The parties, with our support, now need to build on this.

FORUM: Dovetailing on that, how would you respond to criticism that the EU is offering Serbia a huge carrot with potential EU membership pending its cooperation in the talks, but that perhaps Kosovo stands to gain far less?

VALE DE ALMEIDA: The prospect of European Union membership is open to all Balkan countries, provided all the conditions are met that concern different aspects and stages of the process. But for now, we are reassuring these countries that they are part of Europe. They are not in [the Union], and will not be in tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but the possibility is there. This same principle is valid for Kosovo.

FORUM: You have spoken previously of the EU’s efforts to help break down communication barriers and provide a base of common values for a large group of countries. Assuming that the CSFP takes root and the EEAS is successful, what’s next for Europe?

VALE DE ALMEIDA: The European Union has been a great historical success. This is a continent that had been in civil war for decades, if not centuries, and that was separated by an Iron Curtain for a few decades. This continent has also defeated dictatorships inspired by both the left and the right and provided 500 million people with security, stability, and prosperity. This is a great achievement.
So, what’s next? Just as it would have been difficult in the 1950s and 1960s to predict where we are today, it’s very difficult for me to predict 25 years ahead. If you look at the challenges that our societies face today, one chief issue is the integration of immigrant populations. We will continue to have immigration because our demography requires it, but we need to make sure that integration is successful, or we will have tensions in our societies.

We also need to reform our systems, to introduce strong and solid fiscal sustainability measures, and to guarantee that we have the conditions for economic growth, including creating jobs and remaining competitive in the world economy while fighting climate change and protecting our environment.

Foreign policy is also crucial if the EU is to survive. This regional grouping has to project itself as a global actor in order to defend its interests and promote its values. And then there is the issue of security and defense. There is already an evolving security dimension to the EU’s engagement with the rest of the world to support its foreign policy goals and promote its outside interests.

Of course, I think the fundamental asset of the European Union today—and in the past—is the set of values that we stand for: human rights, rule of law, democracy, and freedom. These values are the bedrock of our project.