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Europe's elusive foreign minister

HE IS dominant but deferential. Rigid but flexible. A bureaucrat but a man of action. Beneath his grey flannel suit beats the heart of an international trouble-shooter. Meet "Monsieur PESC", the jargon-term for the European Union's proposed new foreign-policy man. He is due to start work next year, once all 15 EU countries have ratified last year's Amsterdam treaty which created his post. The trick now is to choose the right man for the job—and so determine whether Monsieur PESC makes the world a better place, or merely makes the EU a bigger bureaucracy.

To give Monsieur PESC his full and more ponderous title, he will be the Union's proposed new "high representative" for "common foreign and security policy". He has in the meantime been given the PESC surname because *Politique Etrangère et Sécurité Commune* is the French way of describing his area of responsibility. To a German he is "Herr GASP". To the British he is sometimes "Mr CFSP", suggestive as this may be of a dyslexic investment banker.

He will be attached—with the rank of secretary-general—to the Council of Ministers, the EU's central institution where the 15 governments are meant to take decisions together. Their foreign ministers, not the supranational bureaucracy of the European Commission, will be his collective boss. He will head a "policy planning and early warning" unit, the self-evident mandate of which will be to help plan foreign policy, not to dictate it.

But few people think Monsieur PESC will want to stop there. Institutional "creep" is a main organising principle across the Union. The new foreign-policy unit will be an EU foreign ministry in embryo. The big question is how quickly that embryo will contrive to grow into a fully functioning, self-sufficient adult.

Much will turn on the character and skills of the new high representative. Crudely put, EU leaders could deliberately weaken their creation by choosing as low-flying a figure as they decently could—perhaps from within the existing EU bureaucracy. Alternatively, they could choose a political grandee capable of taking the world stage, but liable to snaffle prerogatives from national governments in the process. One name often mentioned is Felipe Gonzalez, a former prime minister of Spain, who is also seen as a possible next president of the European Commission.

A main incentive for creating Monsieur PESC has been the succession of wars in ex-Yugoslavia and the perceived failure of the EU to respond to them in any very useful way. Mediators and envoys sponsored or co-sponsored by the EU have managed mainly to show how little may be achieved by even the most capable diplomat, when he is sent on an ad hoc mission with no muscle directly at his disposal. Mr Gonzalez, asked by the EU to help sort out the current problems of Kosovo, has been struggling to get a visa to enter the region at all.

The contrast with a more decisive America, against which the EU likes to pace itself in economic terms, is still humiliating. The

formation of an American-led "Contact Group" on Yugoslavia in 1994 was in part an admission that the EU had muffed its chance to lead. So the EU is seeking now, in part, to create the crisis manager it lacked then. The hope is that Monsieur PESC will sound the alarm and stiffen the sinews when another Bosnian or Kosovan agony threatens. He will claim a seat for Europe at the top table when a peace process beckons. He will be the answer to Henry Kissinger's famous question, "Who do you call when you want to call Europe?" Or so it is hoped.

The smaller EU countries are the keenest on a foreign-policy "strongman". They are smarting at having been shut out of the Contact Group, and will be the surest net gainers from a pooling of international clout. But all EU countries have come to see the

inevitability of more movement towards a common foreign policy. The mere passage of time is giving them a shared history. The neutrality favoured by some of the Union's countries during the cold war has become less defensible since. For most EU members, the single currency should sharpen a sense of a common European identity.

The result is that national differences within the EU are becoming less significant and better understood. Inevitably, there will be crunches to come if the EU wants its own seat on the United Nations Security Council or collective membership of the G7 club of rich countries, or if it wants to order parts of NATO around. But such things are far enough away for Monsieur PESC not to need to worry about them.

A common foreign policy may also gain momentum when, eventually, the EU expands to the east. As it takes in countries close to Russia, the provision of "soft security" will become a more conspicuous function of membership. With a turbulent

Russia at their back and such fragile or unsettled states as Ukraine, Belarus and Slovakia for neighbours, the EU's new eastern outliers will want all the political solidarity the Union can supply. (Relations with Belarus are awkward enough already: this week its officials were banned from entering EU countries, after the eviction of several western ambassadors from their homes near Minsk, the Belarussian capital.)

If he plays his cards right, Monsieur PESC will be a popular figure. He will stand for the Europe that helps and protects. If he is wise, he may try to avoid doing much more than that. Whatever its Balkan failings, the EU has long practised one of the world's most successful foreign policies, central to which has been simplicity. By manipulating a single instrument, the prospect of membership, it has brought the once-marginal countries of the Mediterranean securely into the West European fold. It has cast a similar spell over most of Central and Eastern Europe. Precisely because it has evolved as an economic entity, but not as a military one and scarcely as a diplomatic one, it has found friends almost everywhere and few if any real enemies. Surely, no Monsieur PESC would want to change that happy condition?

