Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council

2012-12-18

The Minister for Europe Mr David Lidington said:

My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 10 December, the Foreign Secretary attending the initial part before handing over to me. I attended the General Affairs Council (GAC) on 11 December in Brussels. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, and the General Affairs Council was chaired by the Cypriot Presidency, the Deputy Minister for European Affairs, Ambassador Andreas Mavroyiannis, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Erato Kozakou-Markoullis.

Foreign Affairs Council

Commissioners Füle (Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy) and Georgieva (International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response) were also in attendance for some of the discussions.

A provisional report of the meetings and all Conclusions adopted can be found

here

EU-Russia Summit

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the EU-Russia Summit which will be held in Brussels on 21 December. There was a widely shared view that the EU should focus on human rights, including the role and freedom of NGOs; push Russia to end its restrictive trade practices in order to comply with its World Trade Organisation obligations; press for implementation of the agreement on Siberian overflight royalties; and reaffirm the importance of the Third Energy Package.

Middle East Peace Process

Ministers considered the need for re-engagement by the international community on the Middle East Peace Process in 2013 over lunch. Ministers agreed Conclusions calling for the parties to return to negotiations without precondition with international support; expressing deep dismay at and strong opposition to recent Israeli announcements on settlements; calling

on Israel to avoid undermining the financial situation of the Palestinian Authority; and urging the Palestinians not to build on their change in UN status in a way that would undermine a return to talks.

Southern Neighbourhood

The Council debated the latest developments in Syria, ahead of the next meeting of the Friends of Syria group in Marrakech on 12 December. During lunch, ministers exchanged views with Ahmed Moaz Al-Khatib, President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Ministers agreed Conclusions on Syria, expressing their concern at the deteriorating situation, and the need for greater protection of civilians. The Conclusions state that 'the EU accepts [the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces] as legitimate representatives of the Syrian people'. The Conclusions reiterated that "if concerns about war crimes and crimes against humanity are not adequately addressed on a national level, the International Criminal Court should deal with the situation", and called upon the United Nations Security Council "to urgently address the situation in Syria in all aspects".

Ministers expressed their concern about the situation in Egypt, ahead of the planned referendum on 15 December. They agreed that it was in the EU's interest to see a democratic, inclusive, economically-sound Egypt, and noted the need for strong EU engagement with Egypt, based upon mutual accountability.

Ministers discussed the situation in Libya. The High Representative stated that there had been a number of positive developments in Libya, politically and economically, and that the EU now needed to develop co-operation in border management and security. Ministers welcomed the Fact Finding Mission, which had demonstrated significant Libyan political will to engage. Ministers noted that the EU needed to build on and sustain contacts with the Libyan authorities and UN so that international efforts were coordinated and met Libyan requirements.

Western Balkans

Ministers had a short discussion on Western Balkans issues. This was one of a series of Western Balkans related meetings building up to the General Affairs Council discussion of the Enlargement Conclusions. The High Representative briefed ministers on the latest developments in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, noting that the successful opening of two crossing points was a significant step in terms of Integrated Border Management implementation. Member States welcomed the leadership of Baroness Ashton on this issue.

The need to maintain a credible EU perspective for Macedonia was also raised.

Council Conclusions

As I anticipated in my pre-Council statement, Ministers agreed Conclusions without discussion on Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In addition, Ministers approved the Crisis Management Concept for a Common Security and Defence Policy military mission aimed at providing training and advice to the Malian Armed Forces; and the revised Crisis Management Concept for the EU Training Mission for Somalia. In light of the DPRK's recent announcement of its plan to launch a satellite, in breach of UN Security Council Resolutions, the Council agreed Conclusions expressing deep concern, urging the DPRK not to conduct the launch, and signalling the need for an international response, potentially including sanctions, were the launch to go ahead.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of others measures, including:

Approval of the EU position and provisional agenda for the 13th meeting of the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council, to take place on 17 December in Brussels.

Approval of the EU position and provisional agenda for the 13th meeting of the EU-Georgia Cooperation Council, to take place on 18 December in Brussels.

Approval of the EU position and provisional agenda for the 13th meeting of the EU-Armenia Cooperation Council, to take place on 17 December in Brussels.

Adoption of a decision on the signing, on behalf of the European Union, of a protocol to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the Republic of Armenia, which will allow the participation of Armenia in EU programmes. It forwarded the draft decision on conclusion of the protocol to the European Parliament for its consent.

A review of the list of persons, groups and entities subject to EU restrictive measures with a view to combating terrorism, according to common position 2001/931/CFSP. No changes were made to the measures, which currently affect 11 persons and 25 groups and entities.

Approval of preparations for the annual review of EU restrictive measures against Iran.

Adoption of the implementation plan for the EU advisory and assistance mission for security reform in the Democratic Republic of Congo (EUSEC RD Congo) for the period until 30 September 2013.

General Affairs Council

A provisional report of the meeting and all Conclusions adopted can be found

here

Statute of the Court of Justice of the European Union

The GAC discussed the issue of the appointment of nine additional judges for the General Court of the Court of Justice of the European Union. The Presidency presented their proposals, suggesting a rotating system between Member States with a weighted allocation. I emphasised the importance of sufficient representation of judges from a common law background and stressed the need to ensure that the proposals were budget neutral. There was no consensus on this issue which will be revisited next year.

European Semester and the Annual Growth Survey

The Commission presented the main priorities for this year's Annual Growth Survey, stressing that Member States must "stay the course" on fiscal consolidation and structural reforms if the EU is to achieve long-term, sustainable growth. The incoming Irish Presidency then outlined their roadmap for handling the process in Council, focussing on the importance of bilateral dialogue and multilateral surveillance to resolve Member States' concerns relating to country specific recommendations.

Preparation for the December European Council and February European Council

The Presidency announced the agenda for the February European Council, which is due to focus on trade and external relations. The outcome of the December European Council will be covered in the Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons and the Leader of the House of Lords' statement to the House of Lords.

The 18-month programme for the Presidencies of Ireland, Lithuania and Greece

The GAC endorsed the programme of the incoming Trio of Presidencies; Ireland, Lithuania and Greece. The programme covers a broad range of priorities for the next 18-month period. For Ireland, the key was strengthening Economic and Monetary Union, implementing agreed reforms to economic governance, and securing financial stability including Banking Union. Ireland also looked for progress on the Multiannual Financial Framework and related dossiers. They underlined the importance of measures which have the potential to improve competitiveness and create jobs and growth. Finally they also want to see progress on third country trade agreements.

Enlargement

The GAC discussion focussed on Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo. The Council agreed a package of Conclusions on enlargement including important steps forward for several countries, which rightly recognise their progress so far.

The Council made its commitment to Macedonia's EU path clear with the Council taking a possible decision on opening accession negotiations during the next Presidency, based on a report to be presented by the European Commission in spring 2013 on progress relating to

good neighbourly relations and movement on the name issue. This is an important and valuable opportunity for Macedonia to move further forward next year, and we look forward to a positive decision to open accession negotiations soon. I welcome, in that regard, the Commission starting preparatory work. Likewise the government is pleased that the Commission will propose negotiating directives to take forward Kosovo's EU path with a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, once Kosovo meets the short term conditions. This will be a significant step forward for Kosovo.

The High Representative briefed again on the EU-led Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. I set out the UK government's continued firm support for Serbia's EU future. The Council undertook to review during the first half of next year progress on the conditions the Council has agreed for Serbia to open accession negotiations, including progress in the Dialogue and irreversible progress on the parallel structures in northern Kosovo, as reiterated by the High Representative. The Council was clear that it wanted to see Serbia moving to the next stage as soon as they have met the conditions to do so. The recent steps taken in the EU-led Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo had shown that both countries can move forward and deal with difficult issues, enabling them to continue on their European paths. I welcomed the steps taken by the parties so far and I endorsed the Council's commendation for Prime Ministers Dacic and Thaci: they had approached their recent discussions in a statesman like and courageous manner. The Council expected the two sides to continue and accelerate their work in addressing all aspects of the relations between them.

The conclusions on Bosnia and Herzegovina set out the Council's concern about the slow progress being made in Bosnia and Herzegovina and stalled reforms there; and the risk that Bosnia and Herzegovina will lag further behind her neighbours unless the political leaders deliver on the actions they have agreed. The GAC called on the Bosnian leaders to act, in the interests of their citizens.

The Council Conclusions also covered Albania, reflecting recent progress and underlining the need to further intensify efforts as identified by the Commission. The successful conduct of Parliamentary elections in 2013 will be a crucial test for the smooth functioning of the country's democratic institutions.

The Council adopted forward-looking Conclusions on Turkey which will allow the accession process to be taken forward in 2013.

The Council looked forward to Croatia's accession and welcomed progress made by Iceland and Montenegro.

I will continue to update Parliament on future Foreign Affairs Councils and General Affairs Councils.

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