European External Action Service (EEAS)

# Informal meeting of Defence Ministers: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the press conference

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Thank you Minister [of Defence of Croatia Damir Krstičević], thank you all for being here in this press conference after my first informal meeting of Defence Ministers that I have chaired. Let me start by thanking our Croatian hosts for the remarkable organisation of this meeting. Croatia is fully engaged in its Presidency of the European Union and I would like to praise their efforts.

As I said it was my first informal meeting of Defence Ministers that I chaired in my capacity as High Representative. We touched upon a number of issues of strategic importance that will define our work for the months and years ahead.

We had the presence of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, that joined the Ministers dinner yesterday where we overviewed our operational priorities and our military operations. There are 6 of them and they are mobilising around 5 000 troops all around the world. I wonder if European citizens know that we, Europeans, have a presence from Somalia to Central African Republic, in many operations that are very useful to ensure our security and to stabilise different regions in the world.

For example Operation Sophia, which is coming to an end by the end of this month, has allowed us to destroy more than 500 boats of human traffickers. We have arrested 151 of them and brought them to the judiciary. And we have saved from the sea [almost 45,000] people. [This is] just an example of how important it is to manage this kind of operations where we, Europeans, are putting together our capabilities.

We stressed once again that NATO is indispensable for the security and defence of Europe, but at the same time we want to reinforce the European pillar of NATO. Both are complementary.

Today we have been talking about a new initiative called Strategic Compass. It will cover crisis management, capability tools and instruments, partnerships and protection and resilience. We are going to take a couple of years to develop this new initiative, which is going to be oriented to identify the main threats and challenges that we are going to face and how our capabilities can be mobilised in order to face these challenges.

We, Europeans, need a common strategic culture. We come from different histories and we perceive threats in a different way, but we have to understand a certain indivisibility of the threats. Coming from the East or from the South, they affect Europeans altogether. This requires a deep understanding of the dangerous world in which we live in order to be able to offer a common answer, pooling our capacities, developing them in a coordinated way in order to avoid duplications, filling the gaps and being ready to face – as I said - a world which is every day more challenging and dangerous.

When we started thinking about it, coronavirus did not exist. Nobody was expecting to have to face the difficult situation that we are living in the Eastern Mediterranean. Every day brings a new challenge and we have to build this common strategic culture in order to face them with a European approach.

And finally, I updated Ministers on the ongoing Strategic Review of our Permanent Structured Cooperation [PESCO] and the projects that we are developing under this initiative, to increase our capabilities and to deploy forces in a more coordinated way.

Two years ago, we launched PESCO, today there are almost 50 projects being developed. It is time to take a step back and see what we have been doing well, and where there is a need to adapt it to ensure that we deliver better results.

It has been an interesting meeting, maybe too short, because there are many things to talk about and we are 27 around the table, but I am very happy to have had the opportunity of chairing this meeting, hosted by my friend, the Croatian Minister of Defence [Damir Krstičević].

Thank you very much for your strong support.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-185918

Q&A

Q. On what is happening in the north of Syria, which is close to Europe. What is the European Union position regarding Turkey’s request to impose or to establish a no-flight zone, or a safe, protection zone in North Syria. What is the European Union position since some Member States expressed that they are willing to support a no fly zone. What is the European Union position considering that some Member States expressed that they are willing to consider the Turkish request?

There is no official European Union position. The European Union gathers 27 different countries and in order to have a position it has to be discussed and adopted.

I can say that for me, as High Representative it is for sure a good initiative. Some Member States have been proposing it. I agree that it should be supported by the European Union Member States. Because if we want a ceasefire, if we want to end of the hostilities and the end of the bombings which affects cruelly civilians and civilian facilities, we should create a buffer zone in the airspace [where the fighting is taking place] in order to avoid that the most striking military capacities continue working.

It is a good idea. I am sure it will be discussed in the relevant fora such as NATO and the United Nations. But if I can speak on the name of what I can say is a common understanding of the situation, we have to do whatever we can in order to stop the war in Syria, in Idlib especially, and this would be a good contribution to it.

Q. So what do you expect from today's meeting between President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President of Russia Vladimir Putin in Moscow, especially in the context of this migrant crisis. And what do you think about the statement of President of France Emmanuel Macron and his opinion that Europe should have its own policy toward Russia and not a transatlantic one?

I am not in the secret of the conversations between President Putin and President Erdogan.

f/u Do you have any expectations?

Expectations? The best ones.

f/u And on the comments of President Macron?

We are going to talk this afternoon and tomorrow. We are going to hold the informal meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers, which will have a formal part in order to be able to take decisions. I asked my colleagues to accept to hold a formal part inside an informal meeting, because I think this situation requires not just to talk about it, but to take decisions and to fix positions which can commit all of us.

Russia and Turkey will be the two most important items we are going to discuss today and tomorrow. We need to have a European policy with respect to Russia. We already have one. We have these famous 5 guiding principles that still are adequate, but we have to rethink about the new situation created, and in particular the new assertiveness of Russia in some scenarios which are affecting us like Libya and Syria. We will have to define a new European approach to our relationship with Russia.

Q. Since you spoke about military operations today did you speak about the new military operation that should substitute Operation Sophia? Do you have anything to tell us about it?

Yes, we have been talking about the operation that is going to substitute Operation Sophia. I also said at the beginning that we have to praise the results of Operation Sophia. It is finishing, but with an extraordinary success behind. Sophia has been a good initiative, but everything comes to an end and now it has to be substituted by another one focussing on the arms embargo.

There is a political agreement on that. Also if they find people in the middle of the sea, they will have to deal with them. The humanitarian and international maritime law are still there to be followed but the focus is on the arms embargo, trying to avoid any kind of ‘pull factor’.

The political agreement was reached at the last Foreign Affairs Council. Now the political and military committees are working on finishing their last operational definition of the rules of engagement and availability of boats in order to fill all the resources that we will need in order to implement it. I hope that on the next formal Foreign Affairs Council in March we will be able to conclude and approve the operational mission in order to launch the mission by the month of April.

But there are still some [issues] to be solved and I do not want to sell the victory before having got it. It is going to be difficult. Nobody believed some weeks ago that it was going to be possible, now it seems that it is going to be possible. But let us hope that we are going to be able to overcome the last difficulties.

Q. Was there discussion today of the EU's long term budget, the MFF, and its implications for defence plans in the coming years? Because we have seen in the negotiations that the amount of money allocated for defence purposes seems to be being cut and cut and cut. How concerned are you that this will limit the EU's ambitions in this field?

I think all ministers have shown concern about it. We should have the resources according to our ambitions. We cannot claim that we want to develop a Common Defence and Security Policy and be present geopolitically in difficult scenarios - like in the Sahel, for example - if we do not have the resources needed in order to finance our presence and developing our capacities. It is true that [the money allocated to] the [European] Defence Fund, the military mobility and the European Peace Facility has been reduced on the proposal that the [European] Council has been discussing until now. But there is no agreement, for the time being nothing has been agreed. So, everything is pending and I hope that the Defence Ministers will show to their colleagues from the financial side how important it is to provide funds in order, for example, to provide military capacities to the armies that we are training in the Sahel. We are training soldiers, but we are today unable to provide with the military equipment required for these armies to really be effective on the ground. The European Peace Facility will be one of the ways to overcome this difficulty and I think that at the end we will have enough resources. Well, enough, you know, resources are never enough. But let us say that they will fulfil the minimum required in order to raise our level of ambition.

Q. You said that, however we call it buffer zone, no-flight-zone, protection zone - you said that it is a good initiative. How could the European Union countries contribute to that zone? Is it only that you support the idea or do you see any substantial contribution to implementing it?

[Most] European Member States are members of NATO and [some] of them are in the Security Council of the United Nations. The European Union cannot decide to have a buffer zone in Syria. We would like to speak the language of power, but for the time being we cannot decide this in our own.  But we can be influential on the places and institutions where this kind of decisions can be taken.

f/u Is it only diplomatically?

No, it is institutional. The United Nations takes decisions, NATO takes decisions according to the will of the members, which are represented. It is not just diplomatic. You take decisions, you vote and you approve or reject [proposals].

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-185573

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