Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

General, Foreign & Defence Foreign Affairs Councils: 22-23 April

2013-04-25

The Minister for Europe Mr David Lidington said:

My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and I attended the General Affairs Council (GAC) in Luxembourg on 22 April. My Honourable Friend the Minister for International Security Strategy attended the Defence Foreign Affairs Council (Defence FAC) and the European Defence Agency Steering Board in Luxembourg on 22-23 April. The GAC was chaired by the Irish Presidency, namely the Foreign Minister for Ireland, Eamon Gilmore, and the FAC and Defence FAC were chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland.

Commissioners Reding (Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship), Füle (Enlargement) and Lewandowski (Financial Programming and Budget) were in attendance for some of the discussions at the GAC, and Commissioners Georgieva (International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response), Oettinger (Energy), Füle (Enlargement) and Tajani (Industry and Entrepreneurship) were in attendance for some of the discussions at the FAC and Defence FAC.

General Affairs Council

The 22 April GAC focussed on enlargement, the Multiannual Financial Framework, preparation for the May European Council and EU fundamental values, specifically democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Click here to read the provisional report of the meeting and Conclusions adopted

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Enlargement reports for Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia

Commissioner Füle presented joint EEAS-Commission reports on Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Baroness Ashton briefed the GAC on the 19 April agreement between Serbia and Kosovo reached through an EU-facilitated dialogue. Member States welcomed the agreement and praised Ashton for her positive role.

On Macedonia, Füle noted that implementation had continued on reforms through the High Level Accession Dialogue and that steps had been taken on good neighbourly relations alongside a new momentum to resolve the name issue.

Multiannual Financial Framework

The Presidency outlined the European Parliament's demands on the MFF, namely: reform to the system of own resources; a mid-term review that would allow the ceilings levels agreed to be revisited; and flexibility in how the budget can be spent. I emphasised that nothing should undermine the deal that leaders reached in good faith in February. We needed faithful translations of those Council Conclusions into the regulations.

There was some discussion of the draft amending budget for 2013 in which the Commission have requested an additional €11.2 billion to meet existing commitments and the European Parliament has linked to agreement on the MFF. I argued with other likeminded colleagues that this was clearly too high and that any amending budget must be based on evidence.

Initiative on democracy, human rights and the rule of law/ EU fundamental rights

Denmark, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands sent a letter before the GAC asking for a discussion on their initiative for a new mechanism to safeguard fundamental values in Member States and a greater role for the European Commission. Commissioner Reding gave an overview of the existing mechanisms for the protection of fundamental rights and the rule of law. She undertook to come with a more detailed examination of this issue at the GAC in May.

I welcomed the letter from these Member States calling for work on this initiative, acknowledging the challenge of ensuring that the rule of law, democracy and human rights are not eroded once countries join the EU, as many of the levers for delivering in these areas only apply during the accession process. However, there were already existing mechanisms to address these issues, both within the EU and through the Council of Europe and it was important to ensure that these were not duplicated and that Member State competence in these areas was not compromised.

May European Council

The Presidency gave a presentation on the agenda for the 22 May European Council which will discuss the following: the energy aspects of the single market; tax policy focusing on improving tax collection and tackling tax evasion and fraud; a stock-take on the deepening of

Economic and Monetary Union (EMU); and foreign policy issues. The GAC took note of the agenda without discussion.

Foreign Affairs Council

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

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Energy

Commissioner Oettinger introduced a lunch discussion on energy and foreign policy, drawing out in particular the need for diversification of supply, including pipeline development. The Foreign Secretary noted the potential impact of shale gas on global energy prices, stating that it was important that the EU developed its own shale gas reserves and kept regulation to a minimum. The Foreign Secretary also underlined that energy should form a key part of the EU's free trade agreements; this would respond to the need for diversification that Commissioner Oettinger had highlighted. Ministers also discussed the importance of the EU developing its Southern Corridor pipeline.

Introduction

Baroness Ashton began the plenary session of the FAC by briefing on her activities on a range of issues. She started with an update on the Serbia – Kosovo dialogue, reiterating the message given at the GAC. Her efforts were again praised by Ministers. Baroness Ashton then outlined the state of discussions with Iran following the E3+3 (UK, France, Germany, China, Russia, US) talks with Iran in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on 5-6 April, including next steps and the forthcoming presidential election. Baroness Ashton updated the Council on the situation regarding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The FAC formally adopted a Decision on restrictive measures against the DPRK, transposing sanctions under UN Security Council Resolution 2094.

Southern Neighbourhood

Baroness Ashton set out recent EU activity on Syria, including intensified contacts with Russia; discussions with UN and Arab League Special Representative Brahimi on how to build on the Geneva communiqué; additional humanitarian support to the Opposition, plus amendments to sanctions; and a permanent EU presence in Gazaintep in Turkey to support cross-border projects. At the UK's behest, working groups were tasked to look at all the options for supporting the opposition, including amendments to the EU arms embargo on Syria. The Council amended the oil embargo against Syria to allow for greater EU support to the Syrian Opposition. Once the detail of the exemption and the necessary safeguards have been negotiated, which the UK will ensure are robust, the amendment will allow the EU to

support the oil trade in areas free from regime control by supplying equipment and finance to the oil sector as well as purchasing oil directly.

On Lebanon, discussion primarily focused on the effects of the conflict in Syria, including the influx of refugees. Baroness Ashton stated that the EU and the International Financial Institutions needed to look at how to support the Lebanese Prime Minister-designate's efforts.

Baroness Ashton reported on her recent visit to Egypt, stating that while discussions with President Mursi had been constructive, the situation in Egypt remained fragile. She said that Egypt needed further financial support and to build political stability. The EU was a vital partner for Egypt and did not have the baggage of other international partners. The EU was talking to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank about the support they could provide and had provided advisers to Mursi on the proposed law on non-governmental organisations.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers discussed the Eastern Partnership, looking ahead to November's Summit in Vilnius. The UK made clear that it was open to initialling and signing Association or Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, as long as conditionality is met. On Belarus, Ministers welcomed the news that Sweden can re-establish a diplomatic presence in Minsk, and reviewed the scope of travel bans. The Eastern Partnership will be discussed again at the June FAC, focussing on preparations for the July Eastern Partnership Ministerial meeting. There will also be an early discussion of the Vilnius Summit Declaration.

Mali

Ministers adopted formal Conclusions on Mali. Baroness Ashton gave an update on the work of the EU Training Mission, stating that it was now fully operational, although more contributions of equipment were needed. She updated on progress at the UN Security Council on the establishment of a United Nations Peacekeeping Operation for Mali. The Malian Government was now preparing for the July elections, with the first round of the Presidential elections on 7 July: the EU would provide financial support and an observation mission. Baroness Ashton also noted that the members of the Reconciliation and Dialogue Commission had been appointed and would start work immediately.

Burma

Baroness Ashton outlined the remarkable progress made in Burma over the last eighteen months. Significant challenges remained, but the EU was working closely with the Burmese government and Aung San Suu Kyi to begin a new chapter in relations. To that end, Ministers agreed to lift sanctions, except the arms embargo and restrictions on equipment for internal repression, and adopted Conclusions on the future of EU-Burma relations. Baroness Ashton

also stated she would launch a Task Force to provide further political and economic support. Commissioner Georgieva welcomed the Burmese government's engagement on development assistance and outlined plans to share EU expertise on ethnic integration; provide political and financial support to the Rohingya; and continue to pressure the government for humanitarian access to Kachin and Rakhine State.

Ministers discussed the importance of keeping human rights central to the EU's planned comprehensive approach to Burma, and the need to develop a coherent framework for EU engagement with Burma, focusing on human rights and the resolution of ethnic and religious tensions. The UK also highlighted the need for greater international action to resolve the serious humanitarian situation in Rakhine State, and welcomed President Thein Sein's commitment to renounce military ties with the DPRK.

Other business

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

The Council approved the EU position for the EU-Algeria Association Committee regarding the implementation of the provisions concerning industrial products set out in the Association Agreement.

The Council approved preparations for the annual review of EU restrictive measures against certain persons, entities and bodies threatening the peace, security or stability of Guinea-Bissau.

The Council amended EU sanctions in view of the situation in Libya to take account of changes adopted at the UN. It permitted the supply of non-lethal military equipment and technical assistance intended solely for security or disarmament assistance to the Libyan government. It also allowed the supply of small arms, light weapons and related materiel, for the sole use of UN personnel and development workers.

The Council reinforced restrictive measures against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea so as to implement UN Security Council resolution 2094 (2013).

The Council agreed Conclusions on Iraq, expressing concern about recent violence but welcoming the relatively peaceful conduct of provincial elections. The Conclusions commit the EU to long-term engagement with Iraq in our priority areas: rule of law and economic growth.

The Council adopted revised EU guidelines on the death penalty, outlining how the EU intends to continue its long-standing campaign against the death penalty.

The Council endorsed the fourteenth progress report on the implementation of the EU strategy to combat illicit accumulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons and

their ammunition. The report covers activities during the second semester 2012.

The Council amended the legal basis for the European Security and Defence College, allocated funding and approved an increase in seconded staff to the college.

The Council adopted the EU position on the rules of procedure of the economic partnership agreement (EPA) committee, the customs cooperation committee and the joint development committee provided for by the interim EPA with Eastern and Southern African states.

Defence Foreign Affairs Council

A provisional report of the meeting and Conclusions adopted can be here

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Sahel / EU Training Mission Mali

Ministers discussed security threats in the Sahel and wider region over dinner, with a focus on the EU Training Mission (EUTM) to Mali. EUTM Commander, General Lecointre, highlighted early successes in training the Malian armed forces but also the considerable challenges of training a severely limited army and officer corps lacking in equipment in only four months. Ministers praised France's leading role in the response to the crisis but recognised the significant support required to re-build Mali. The UK flagged the importance of earlier conflict prevention activity upstream demonstrated by the crisis in Mali. NATO Deputy Secretary-General Vershbow made the case for co-ordinated EU/NATO work on capability development.

European Defence Agency Steering Board

The EDA Steering Board addressed a number of capability issues, with the UK reiterating its offer regarding unallocated Voyager refuelling hours to help meet a shortfall across European nations' capabilities. The EDA also reiterated the importance of better EU/NATO working, a key UK argument for a number of years.

December European Council

As part of a wider discussion on preparations for the December European Council Ministers concentrated on the Defence Industry. The UK and a number of key partners expressed closely aligned views on a number of issues, including competitiveness and access to non-European industry.

Battlegroups

Ministers discussed the EU Battlegroup concept, focusing on Member States considering adopting a more flexible and usable approach, in line with our intent. The UK highlighted its

recent political exercise with its four Battlegroup partner nations, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden and the Netherlands, as part of preparations for being on the Battlegroup roster from 1 July.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/general-foreign-defence-foreign-affairs-councils-22-23-april