Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Affairs and General Affairs Councils: 11 March

2013-03-07

In a written ministerial statement the Minister for Europe Mr David Lidington said:

My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and I will attend the General Affairs Council (GAC), both on 11 March in Brussels. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, and the General Affairs Council will be chaired by the Irish Presidency.

Russia

Ministers will have a broad discussion on the EU-Russia relationship. Conclusions are not expected. This discussion will provide an opportunity to exchange views on the importance of the EU's trade relationship with Russia, as well as underlining Member States' concerns on human rights and democratic standards. This discussion will serve as preparation for consideration of the EU's strategic relationship with Russia at the European Council on 15 March. The FAC discussion will take place ahead of the visit of the Russian Foreign and Defence Ministers to London on 13 March.

Southern Neighbourhood

Ministers will discuss events in Egypt and Tunisia. We believe that the EU should encourage inclusive political transition and protection of human rights. The UK will argue that EU support to these countries needs to be ambitious and well communicated, with clear progress on agreed political and economic reforms matched with further support. We will support an EU Observer Mission for the Egyptian parliamentary elections.

Ministers will also discuss the current situation in Syria and will be joined over lunch by the United Nations and the League of Arab States Joint Special Representative for Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi.

Japan

The EU-Japan Summit will take place on 25 March in Tokyo and Ministers will discuss the EU's priorities for that Summit. Negotiations on the EU-Japan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and Framework Agreement, which the UK strongly supports, will be launched at that Summit. The EU and Japan will also agree to work together more closely on issues such as the

growth agenda, climate change, energy policy and international issues of the day, such as the DPRK, Iran and Syria.

Iran

This discussion will focus on the recent E3+3 (UK, France, Germany, China, Russia, US) nuclear talks with Iran in Almaty, where a confidence building measure was put to Iran. We will make it clear that whilst Iran's agreement to further meetings is welcome, there is no sign yet of a significant shift in the Iranian position. If Iran makes no progress on addressing our most immediate concerns about its nuclear programme, we will need to tighten existing measures to increase the pressure it faces.

Kenya

Ministers will discuss the conduct and outcome of the elections held on 4 March in Kenya.

General Affairs Council

The 11 March GAC will focus on preparation for the 14-15 March European Council. The European Council agenda has two items that the GAC will consider: Economic policy and external relations (in conjunction with the FAC).

After the plenary session there will be a meeting with the President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy. We expect this to focus on political directions for the European Semester and European Monetary Union.

14-15 March European Council preparation

The economic policy agenda item covers the European Semester, the annual cycle of economic policy coordination in the EU, which begins each year with the publication of the Commission's Annual Growth Survey. The European Council will set growth and structural reform priorities for the EU and the Member States for the year ahead. The March Council will also take stock of Member States' progress in implementing reform commitments under the 2012 Country-Specific Recommendations and will provide broad guidance to Member States on the 2013 Stability and Convergence Programmes and National Reform Programmes. Ministers will also discuss progress on formulating next steps in deepening European Monetary Union, as a staging post towards the June European Council meeting at which this will be a central focus.

On external relations, the European Council will discuss strategic partners focussing on EU-Russia relations. We expect that the preparation for this part of the European Council agenda, and any discussion on foreign policy, will primarily be covered in the Foreign Affairs Council, but GAC ministers may also want to use this opportunity to guide discussions at the

European Council. They may also raise issues that have read-across to the broader work of the GAC such as the European Neighbourhood Policy or Heading 4 funding.

Further information

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