

**Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence
31 May 2018**

Developments at the Foreign Affairs Council

Opening Statement by the Tánaiste (check against delivery)

Opening

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address you on developments at the EU Foreign Affairs Council. I had been due to come before the Committee on 1 March, but this was cancelled due to adverse weather – happily that weather seems to be behind us now. I am pleased to have an opportunity for a discussion on developments at the Council, which most recently met on Monday.

My Department has provided a detailed information note to the Committee on the wide range of issues that the Foreign Affairs Council has considered these past few months. In the interests of maximising the time available for discussion, I propose to address only the **major themes** of the Council's discussions in my opening remarks.

Middle East Issues

Naturally, in what has been a period of upheaval, the **Middle East Peace Process** has been one of the most frequent topics on the FAC agenda, in September 2017, and again at the December, January and February Councils. Our December FAC meeting came just after the US announcement in relation to Jerusalem, and we discussed the impact this would have – an unambiguously negative impact, as we made clear at the time. There was also an informal breakfast with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, which allowed for a useful and frank conversation. The level of EU unity in support of a two state solution was

notable, and I used this opportunity to speak about the damage which the continued construction of settlements on Palestinian land is doing to prospects for peace.

At the January FAC, we discussed how best we could support the Palestinian leadership in its efforts to keep the hopes of the population focused on the political track. We re-stated our support for UNRWA's work. I highlighted the need to support the Palestinian leadership, as well as my deep concerns about the untenable situation in Gaza. We had an informal lunch with President Abbas where we reiterated the EU's strong support for a two-state solution, in a constructive discussion. We had a further discussion on the Middle East Peace Process at the February FAC, and also had an exchange with some of the key Arab Foreign Ministers on this issue, focusing especially on the prospects for a US peace initiative.

I requested that Gaza be added to the agenda for the FAC last Monday, following the shocking events there in recent weeks. Even before these events in Gaza, this has been a difficult and dispiriting period, with ongoing settlement construction, demolitions, and restrictions on economic development making the path forward ever more difficult. Decisions such as the announcement last week of further settlement construction, and the court judgement on the Bedouin community of Khan al Amar are extremely worrying, and threaten to erode directly the physical space which is needed to establish a Palestinian state. I have also strongly condemned rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, which undermine the Palestinian cause and are counterproductive in terms of alleviating humanitarian suffering in Gaza.

That situation is worsening, and efforts to restore Palestinian Authority governance in Gaza seem to have stalled for now. The US announcement on

moving its Embassy to Jerusalem was, as I said, a disappointing and premature development, and it has undoubtedly complicated US efforts to bring forward a successful peace initiative. Ireland has been to the fore in pressing for constructive EU action on this issue, and keeping it high on our agenda. I have visited the region twice to meet with all the key players, and will visit again next week, something which has informed my contributions to EU discussions.

The situation in **Libya** was on the agenda for the FAC in July 2017, and again in January 2018, when the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, joined our discussions. Ministers share a deep concern about the appalling abuses which have been reported against migrants in Libya, and agreed on the importance of supporting UN agencies working to improve the conditions of migrants, and of working with countries of origin to address migration. The restoration of stable government in Libya, where the rule of law can be implemented across the territory of the country, is essential to bringing a permanent end to these abuses, and it was useful for us to discuss with the UN Special Representative his plans for bringing the parties together, and to prepare for elections.

The influence of **Iran** on the region is a worrying and negative one, especially the support which Iran has provided to the murderous regime of President Assad. Nevertheless, Ireland believes that the Iran nuclear deal showed how multilateral political action can help to de-escalate some of the world's worst security challenges. Ireland firmly supports non-proliferation, and believes that the entire Middle East should be a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. The situation in Iran was discussed at the FAC in October 2017, and again in March 2018, in April, and earlier this week. The EU has been united in our support to the Iran nuclear agreement, and we were deeply disappointed that the US has withdrawn from it. The EU continues to be committed to the deal, as

long as Iran fulfils its obligations under the agreement, and I call on the other parties likewise to remain committed.

There are a number of complex and interlinked conflicts in the Middle East region, so it was useful to have a **broader discussion in December on recent developments across the Middle East**. This allowed us to touch on the linkages between the situations in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Gulf Crisis. Our discussions stressed the primacy of the UN's Geneva process on Syria and the need for accountability; the need for unity and dialogue in Iraq, support for stability and for upcoming elections in Lebanon, and the need for continued support in Jordan. On Iran, there was agreement that the EU should continue to engage on and through the nuclear deal, but also that we address Iran's regional activities and ballistic missiles programme. In my own intervention, I focused on Syria and on Yemen. I called for the EU to make a political contribution in support of a negotiated solution in Yemen.

There was a more detailed discussion on **Syria** at the February, March and April FACs. The situation there is increasingly desperate, and there have been appalling attacks on civilians, as we have all seen on the news. Outside involvement is fuelling and sustaining this conflict. Ministers agreed on the need for a strong push to re-start the UN's Geneva process. There is also a concern that the re-ignition of fighting in a number of areas may take the pressure off ISIS, which had lost most of its territory in the last year, but which has not disappeared.

Western Balkans

At the April FAC, we discussed the Western Balkans in preparation for the Summit which took place on 17 May. Ireland is a firm supporter of the European Perspective of the Western Balkans, and I was pleased that the

support that Ministers expressed for the current focus on the region has been reflected in a successful Summit. We agree on the need to encourage the Western Balkans to continue to vigorously pursue reforms and that we, as the EU, need to give practical assistance. The stability of the region is important to the security of the EU and we need to be sure that our message is communicated effectively.

Ukraine

The March FAC had a discussion on Ukraine which covered progress on implementation of the national reform programme and the ongoing conflict in the east of the country. The High Representative updated Ministers on her visit to Ukraine a few days earlier, where she reaffirmed the EU's unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Ministers agreed that significant progress had been made on the reforms, while noting that much more still needed to be done.

Russia

In March the UK updated Ministers on the Salisbury nerve agent attack and the Council expressed its full solidarity and support for the UK. At the April FAC, Member States stressed the need for EU unity on Russia and upheld the validity of the five guiding principles for the relationship, which have served the EU well. Several States urged greater support for civil society in Russia. On sanctions, there was broad agreement that the lack of progress on implementation of the Minsk Agreement and Russia's unwillingness to engage constructively in the Trilateral Contact Group negotiations made it inevitable that the restrictive measures would remain in place.

DPRK

In March, Ministers discussed the situation on the Korean Peninsula with the South Korean Foreign Minister, who gave a generally optimistic assessment of developments with DPRK. High-level talks held between the Republic of Korea and the DPRK since then, and the prospect of direct talks with the US, are an encouraging signal which can be conducive to fostering trust and de-escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, along with our EU partners, we remain conscious that similar initiatives in the past have not worked out, despite significant political and financial investment. We are also conscious of the DPRK's serial breaching of UN Security Council resolutions in relation to missile testing and nuclear detonations as well as its appalling human rights record.

Ireland continues therefore to support the EU's policy of critical engagement with DPRK, which was reaffirmed during our discussion in March. This combines pressure with sanctions and other measures while keeping communication and dialogue channels open. The EU is also maintaining dialogue with third countries such as China in order to ensure that restrictive measures are being implemented in an effective way.

Ireland continues to provide some humanitarian assistance in the DPRK via the World Food Programme and through international NGOs operating in North Korea.

EU-Africa Relations/ Post-Cotonou

The Foreign Affairs Council has considered the follow-up to the EU-African Union Summit held in Abidjan last November. If the relationship between the African Union and the EU is to be productive and constructive, we must meet

more frequently, and at the highest political levels, over the months and years ahead.

In addition, the Council has been considering the forthcoming negotiations with African, Caribbean and Pacific states on a successor to the current Cotonou Partnership Agreement which expires in 2020. The Cotonou Agreement is a comprehensive partnership for economic, social and cultural development of the three regions. The EU's aim is for a new partnership, called post-Cotonou, that re-energises relations and which emphasises regular and high level political engagement. The Council this week agreed to further work on the negotiating mandate.

EU Global Strategy

Aside from considering day to day foreign policy issues, the FAC has also been discussing how the EU can promote a rules-based international order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core. The EU Global Strategy sets out a vision for foreign and security policy. It commits the Union to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The Council has been monitoring progress on the implementation of the Strategy. In the area of security and defence this includes strengthening the EU's peacekeeping capacity in support of the United Nations. We have also made progress on implementing a strategic approach to strengthening the resilience of states and societies in our neighbourhood and in developing an integrated approach to conflicts and crises. A particular priority in the time ahead will be the EU's role in strengthening multilateralism and global governance.

PESCO

PESCO was formally launched at the Foreign Affairs Council on 11 December. 25 Member States are participating. The Irish Government approved participation on 21 November and Dáil Éireann approval was obtained on 7 December in accordance with the provisions of the Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. This enabled Ireland to participate in PESCO from the outset.

For us PESCO is a tool for Member States to jointly develop the essential capabilities necessary to carry out peace keeping tasks in missions from Lebanon to Mali. PESCO can only operate in that context, anchored within the Global Strategy and bound to all the other measures – prevention, mediation, diplomatic, development, economic – that form part of the EU’s Integrated Approach to situations of conflict and crisis.

Ireland’s participation will enhance the Defence Forces’ capabilities for a wide range of United Nations-mandated missions where they must be able to work with contingents from other countries. It allows the men and women of our Defence Forces to gain access to the latest equipment and training, which enhances their ability to participate safely and effectively in challenging peace-keeping missions. 25 of the 28 Member States are participating, including other Member States such as Austria, Cyprus, Finland and Sweden who are neutral or not members of any military alliance.

The deployment of the Defence Forces overseas on peacekeeping missions will continue to be governed by the “triple-lock”, which requires UN authority and approval by the Government and Dáil Éireann. Any capabilities developed, or equipment procured under PESCO, belong to the Member States individually

and any deployment remains a decision solely for the Member State concerned in accordance with its legal and constitutional requirements.

CSDP

Maximising the potential of the EU's military and civilian CSDP is another priority. Civilian Missions have traditionally focussed on the need to strengthen the police, rule of law and civilian administration in host countries. New and increasing challenges such as cyber and hybrid threats, organised crime, counter-terrorism and irregular migration are now forming part of these Missions' work. These new challenges will mean changes to the way CSDP operates to ensure that it is as responsive and as effective as possible.

Good progress has already been made. There is strong commitment that more can be done, including on preparing a new Civilian Capabilities Development Plan in the first half of this year and a civilian CSDP Compact by the end of this year. My Department currently seconds a total of 12 civilian experts in 8 of the 10 civilian CSDP missions in Europe, the Middle East, and in Libya, Somalia and the Sahel. 8 members of An Garda Síochána are also deployed to the EU's mission in Kosovo. It is vital that they have the tools they need to operate effectively.

Closing

Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to update the Committee on what I think you will agree has been a wide-ranging agenda at the Foreign Affairs Council. I look forward to hearing the perspectives on Members on these issues and to answering any questions you may have.

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