

**Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence  
3 October 2019**

**Developments at the Foreign Affairs Council**

**Opening Statement by the Tánaiste (check against delivery)**

**Opening**

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to meet with you this afternoon. I am keen to update members on developments at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, which most recently met on 15 July, and to discuss other foreign policy issues. My Department has provided an information note to the Committee on the range of issues that the Foreign Affairs Council has considered in the nine months since we last met. In order to maximise the time available for discussion, I will address the major themes of the Council's discussions in my opening remarks.

**Middle East Issues**

The Foreign Affairs Council frequently discusses Middle East issues. As part of our commitment to work more closely with the region, c, an **EU-League of Arab States** Foreign Ministers' meeting took place in February, which prepared the first ever EU-League of Arab States Summit later that month. I made strong statements on Syria and Yemen, stressing that any refugee returns to Syria should be voluntary.

In February, Foreign Ministers discussed the worsening humanitarian and security situation in Syria. We were clear that any refugee returns must be voluntary, and should only take place when conditions allow. We expressed support for the UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and also discussed preparations for the Syria Conference in March, where Ireland pledged €25 million, bringing the total amount of our humanitarian assistance since 2012 to over €143 million. I am encouraged that, in the last few days, there has been agreement establish a Constitutional Committee for Syria. I hope this is a first step towards an inclusive political settlement.

Also in February, we adopted Council Conclusions on **Yemen**, reiterating our support for the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement and urging engagement with the UN-led process.

In March, we discussed ways to support the UN Special Envoy and to maintain the EU's commitment in delivering humanitarian aid. Progress since then on the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement has been disappointing. I hope that recent indications that the Houthis may consider a ceasefire can be built on. We will continue to support UN efforts to reach a political solution.

At the May FAC, we discussed recent developments in **Libya**, including the fighting around Tripoli, with the UN Special Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salamé. We are all clear that there is no military solution to the crisis in Libya. We urged all parties to re-commit to the UN-facilitated political dialogue, and called for an immediate ceasefire and the protection of civilians, including migrants and refugees.

At the March FAC, I called for a continuation of the full mandate of **Operation Sophia** to allow time for the outstanding issues around disembarkation to be addressed without disrupting the critical humanitarian work of the Mission. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get full agreement but we did ensure that the Operation will continue and that its mandate will remain under review so as to be able to respond to any changing circumstances.

Ireland will continue to work towards a resolution of outstanding issues to allow for a resumption of deployment of naval assets in the Mediterranean.

We must act together to find European-wide solutions to address the migration challenges faced by the EUEU member states must play their part in burden-sharing and helping to relieve pressure on frontline Member States. We need to find a consensus based on solidarity and responsibility. Addressing the migration crisis requires deeper political, economic and development relationships between the EU and our partners, particularly in Africa.

Minister of State McEntee attended the June FAC, where Ministers had a working lunch with Jordanian Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi. Discussion focused on regional issues including Iran's negative influence in the region, the Middle East Peace Process, and hosting Syrian refugees.

At the July FAC, we discussed **Iran**. I am deeply concerned about Iran's steps away from the nuclear agreement (the JCPOA), and the recent escalation of tensions in the region following an attack on Saudi Arabia on 14 September. The EU remains committed to maintaining the JCPOA and we urge Iran to return to full compliance without delay. I raised this directly with Iran at a meeting last week in New York.

Also in July, we discussed the situation in **Iraq**. We adopted Council Conclusions on the EU's Iraq Strategy, stressed our support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country and for economic, political and security sector reform.

### **Afghanistan**

In April, Council Conclusions were adopted on Afghanistan. Ireland supports an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process, with a constructive role played by regional actors and the meaningful participation of women. Along with our EU Partners, we are also working to ensure that the humanitarian situation in the country is not neglected. We would encourage all parties to the conflict to come together and negotiate for a sustainable peace.

### **EU-Africa Relations, Horn of Africa, Sudan, Sahel**

In January 2019, the first **EU-African Union** Ministerial level meeting took place. Ministers focused on implementing the MoU on Peace, Security and Governance and on President Juncker's Initiative; the Alliance for Sustainable Investments and Jobs, which seeks to boost private sector engagement, increase trade and enhance job creation. The Council Conclusions adopted underlined the importance of the EU's strategic partnership with Africa.

At the February FAC, on the **Horn of Africa**, I emphasised that we must act in a coordinated manner to strengthen democratic governance and inclusive economic growth in the region. I welcomed the peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea and EU support to both sides to institutionalise and consolidate the new relationship.

At the June FAC, Ireland strongly supported the EU's statement on Sudan and the robust leadership shown by the African Union and Ethiopia in their joint efforts to resolve the crisis in Sudan. I am very encouraged by the civilian-led transition agreed in September, which should pave the way for peace, security and economic growth in Sudan.

The **Sahel** was discussed at the May FAC, including with the G5 Sahel countries. The EU has prioritised security, humanitarian and development issues across the region, and we need to focus on tackling the root causes of conflict, migration and poverty, while maintaining focus on governance and human rights. A more holistic response to issues affecting the region is required. The High Representative co-chaired the 5<sup>th</sup> EU-G5 Sahel Ministerial meeting in July 2019.

### **Eastern Partnership, Moldova, Ukraine**

This year marked the tenth anniversary of the **Eastern Partnership**. At the April FAC, we discussed implementation of its reform programme, “20 deliverables for 2020”, and the future of the partnership post-2020. At the Ministerial Meeting in May, my EU colleagues and I sent a strong signal of our continuing commitment to the Eastern Partnership and to the principles of inclusivity and differentiation.

At the March FAC, discussions on **Moldova** focused on the February parliamentary elections. The High Representative described the elections as competitive with fundamental rights respected, but with some shortcomings. While coalition talks were unsuccessful for several months, a coalition government was formed on 8 June between the pro-EU ACUM party bloc and the pro-Russia Socialist party of President Igor Dodon.

Ireland supports the readiness of the EU to work with the government of the Republic of Moldova, on the basis of a mutual commitment to reforms and the principles enshrined in our Association Agreement.

At the February FAC, we expressed our continued solidarity with **Ukraine** on the fifth anniversary of the Maidan. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance and supporting conflict resolution efforts, we will continue to support Ukraine’s reform agenda and to increase EU support for the Azov Sea region.

## **EU-ASEAN**

In January, Ministers discussed the EU's relationship with the ten Member States of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Following the FAC, I attended the 22nd EU-ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, where we discussed ways to enhance cooperation, particularly on fair trade human rights, sustainable development and climate change.

## **China**

At the April FAC, we discussed EU-China relations. We agreed on the need to balance an open and constructive relationship while remaining firm in pursuit of EU values and interests. The EU-China Summit which took place following FAC, demonstrated the success of this approach. We must engage China in supporting the existing rules-based international order and multilateral institutions, while remaining clear on the need for universal standards, agreed rules and practices to be respected. Consensus among EU partners is essential in delivering this approach.

## **Venezuela**

The current crisis in Venezuela has been discussed at successive FACs this year and we received regular updates on the progress of the International Contact Group. At the May FAC, I voiced support for the ICG, stressed the need for continued engagement and welcomed progress made on the humanitarian track of the ICG. In July, we reiterated our support for the Oslo Talks process between the Maduro administration and the opposition. While these talks are now stalled, Ireland will continue to encourage both sides to engage in good faith in an inclusive, serious and results oriented process. We also support EU efforts to achieve a peaceful electoral path as a way out of the current crisis.

## **EU Global Strategy, CFSP Effectiveness**

The Council continues to monitor the implementation of the EU's Global Strategy, which commits us to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In June, HR Mogherini presented a report assessing three years of the Global Strategy, which outlines achievements across all five strands: security and defence, resilience, the integrated approach to conflicts and crises, regional cooperative orders and global governance.

Addressing the challenges outlined in the Strategy requires united, consistent and effective action by the EU. At the FAC in June, Ministers held a further discussion about ways to improve the effectiveness of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. We exchanged views on how to enhance our unity, cohesion and coordination.

### **Disinformation**

The FAC has also addressed implementation of the EU Joint Action Plan on Disinformation, adopted last December, which aims to improve the detection and analysis of disinformation, to strengthen cooperation and to raise awareness and increase resilience. The EU has established a Rapid Alert System for National Points of Contact which facilitates information-sharing. A mapping exercise has also been conducted to assess the institutional capacity of member states and a network of fact-checkers and media monitors is being developed.

### **SECCO**

Finally, an important cross-cutting aspect of the work of the FAC is the centrality of the multilateral system in addressing global challenges. You know of course that Ireland is a candidate for the UN Security Council for 2021-2022 and I spent much of last week at the UN General Assembly, promoting Ireland's candidature and highlighting our global contributions to peace and security, human rights and development. I am happy to provide an update to the Committee on our campaign and look forward to hearing your comments and questions.

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