

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence

28 February 2023

Opening Statement

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for this invitation to brief you today. I look forward to our exchange on foreign policy issues.

I'll speak today on the key foreign policy priorities currently under discussion at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, as well as sharing some reflections on our UN Security Council term.

I will also outline some of the foreign and security policy issues and challenges that my Department will be focusing on in the months ahead.

As we mark one year since Russia's brutal and unprovoked attack on Ukraine, it is a timely moment to reflect on the international multilateral system and Ireland's engagement with it.

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine is undoubtedly the single greatest challenge to the rules-based international order since its foundation in the years after the Second World War.

The multilateral system, with the UN Charter at its heart, is the bedrock of international peace and security.

Respect for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states is the universally accepted principle, enshrined in the Charter, and which allows for peaceful global co-existence.

It is the foundation of all our security.

As a small, militarily neutral country, it is no exaggeration to say that our very existence as a sovereign state relies on compliance by all states – however large and powerful – with this principle.

Multilateralism is at the core of our values and it is at the core of our interests. It is more important than ever that states like Ireland, with a long-standing and principled commitment to the United Nations, are willing to serve on the Security Council, as well as other UN bodies.

We had no illusions that serving on the Security Council would be easy. We knew that any progress we could make would be hard won and incremental.

But we firmly believed it was important for Ireland to contribute to the Council fulfilling its vital mandate, as the body with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

As you know, Ireland took on a number of important leadership roles during our term on the Council, which concluded in December.

Despite unprecedented fragmentation and political polarisation on the Council, we made an impact.

Let me give some examples.

First, we successfully brokered agreement in 2021 and 2022 to renew the vital resolution which allows the UN to deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance to North West Syria from Türkiye.

That humanitarian operation was essential in keeping four million people alive over those two years.

It has also been vital in ensuring that aid has been able to reach Syrians affected by the tragic earthquake which hit the Turkish-Syrian border this month.

Ireland has released €10 million for immediate humanitarian relief, as well as providing pre-positioned emergency supplies from Irish Aid, including tents, blankets and water.

A second important Irish achievement on the Security Council was the negotiation of a groundbreaking Resolution, which delivered a horizontal carve-out for humanitarian activities, across all 15 UN sanctions regimes.

This ensures that, whenever UN sanctions are imposed to respond to gross human rights and humanitarian law abuses, or to counter terrorist financing and activities, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to civilians in those countries will not be inadvertently impeded.

We are also now working at EU level to extend the provisions of that resolution to EU sanctions regimes.

Ireland has pushed strongly since the earthquake to expedite a humanitarian carve out to the EU Syria sanctions regime and I am pleased that the main changes that Ireland proposed have now been agreed.

A third area of priority for Ireland on the Security Council was peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

We secured a Security Council resolution on peacekeeping transitions; ensuring that when military peacekeeping operations end, the gains of peace are maintained through active UN engagement and support for civilian peacebuilding.

I know that the Committee are very supportive of Ireland's role in UN peacekeeping operations and UN-mandated, EU-led crisis management missions.

This reflects the cross-party, cross-society support for Ireland's participation in UN mandated missions.

The tragic death of Private Seán Rooney and the injury of his three comrades in the appalling attack on a UNIFIL convoy has brought home to all of us the risks that Irish men and women take when serving their country abroad in the cause of peace.

I travelled to Lebanon myself in January and met with Lebanese and UN officials.

We are continuing to engage closely with the Lebanese and UN authorities to ensure that this heinous attack is thoroughly investigated, and that those who were responsible are brought to account.

A fourth area of our work on the Council that I would like to reflect on is Ukraine. This was undoubtedly the issue which dominated the second year of our term. It also remains at the top of the EU Foreign Affairs Council agenda.

I spoke at the one year commemoration of the invasion at the ceremony at the GPO last Friday.

What I said there, I will repeat here – one year on from Russia’s brutal attack, Ireland’s support, and the EU’s support, to Ukraine is unwavering.

Ukraine’s values are EU values. Ukraine’s interests are EU interests. Ukraine’s security is the EU’s security.

On the Security Council, we used our voice to speak out against Russia’s brutal aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbour; its violation of international humanitarian law through attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure; its use of its place at the Council table to spread cynical disinformation; and to demand full accountability for possible war crimes and crimes against humanity.

With our term on the Security Council finished, we will continue to play a leading role at EU level and internationally on this issue.

Every month on the EU Foreign Affairs Council we discuss how the EU can best contribute to ending this brutal war and continuing our multi-dimensional support for Ukraine.

Most recently, we have imposed a tenth package of sanctions against Russia, the latest in the most extensive suite of sanctions ever implemented by the EU.

We also need to ensure that Russia pays a price for its violation of the UN Charter.

We have provided additional funding of €3 million to the International Criminal Court, to support its work on all the situations before the Court, including Ukraine.

We are supporting Ukraine's cases against Russia at the International Court of Justice and at the European Court of Human Rights.

We are working with Ukraine and other partners to establish credible and appropriate structures to deal with the crime of aggression.

We must be clear-eyed about the scale of the challenge ahead. Russia will continue to wage this brutal war.

I have maintained regular contact with Ukrainian Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, and I have spoken to him on the phone in recent months.

I have assured him that, in addition to providing humanitarian, stabilisation and non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine, we will continue to welcome Ukrainian refugees under the EU Temporary Protection Directive and we will champion and support Ukraine on its path to EU membership.

Let me now turn to some of the other issues that we have focused on in the last few months at the EU Foreign Affairs Council.

In January, EU Foreign Ministers met with Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh and Foreign Minister Riad Malki.

We agreed to intensify engagement between the EU and the Palestinian Authority, at a time when it is under unprecedented pressure.

We discussed the deteriorating situation on the ground, Israeli settlement activity, demolitions and evictions, and the Palestinian political situation.

The events of the past few weeks are testament to the urgent need for movement towards dialogue between the parties.

No one is under any illusion that we are likely to move to comprehensive peace talks anytime soon.

But we must push, at the very least, for intensified engagement to prevent further escalation.

And let me repeat here what I have said already in statements responding to events in Nablus and Jenin. Israel, as an occupying power, has an obligation under international law to protect civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

It must adhere to international law. I will continue to urge the EU to play a more-forward leaning role in the conflict.

The situation in Afghanistan has also been high on our agenda and was most recently discussed by the Foreign Affairs Council on 20 February.

There is unfortunately no indication that the Taliban is prepared to respect fundamental and universal human rights, particularly the rights of women and girls.

The recent edict limiting even further the role of women in public life is catastrophic for the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, as well as for the economic and humanitarian situation in the country.

There are unfortunately few pressure points available to us in influencing the Taliban. At the same time, we have an obligation to the millions of people facing extreme poverty in Afghanistan.

Frankly speaking, there are no easy decisions when it comes to Afghanistan.

At the Foreign Affairs Council, we agreed that EU humanitarian, basic needs and livelihood assistance to Afghanistan should continue, as long as it can be delivered in a non-discriminatory way, and in line with principles agreed by the international humanitarian donor community.

This will be closely monitored and we will regularly review progress over the coming six-month period.

Iran has also featured on the agenda of recent meetings of the Council.

The EU continues to discuss how to address human rights violations, Iran's nuclear proliferation activities and its military support to Russia.

The EU has adopted a number of sanctions against individuals and entities in Iran in recent months.

We will continue to carefully calibrate our response in the months ahead.

Chairman,

Before I conclude, allow me to speak briefly about the agreement reached yesterday between the EU and the UK on the way forward for the Protocol on Northern Ireland, the ‘Windsor Framework’.

This new agreement is the result of genuine engagement between the EU and the UK.

They have listened to the concerns raised by elected representatives, citizens, and business in Northern Ireland and have responded with a package that comprehensively addresses those concerns.

It is my hope that the agreement will provide the certainty and stability that Northern Ireland needs in order to move forward.

The focus can now turn to getting the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement up and running, across all three strands.

I appreciate that some time may be needed to consider the detail of the deal.

But I know from my many engagements with the people in Northern Ireland that they wish to see an Executive formed without delay.

I urge political leaders in Northern Ireland to respond to that wish.

Yesterday's agreement provides an opportunity for us to turn a page and open up a new chapter in EU-UK relations.

It is also an opportunity for an improved British-Irish partnership, which has been so vital for peace and prosperity on these islands.

I would also like to put on the record here my deepest appreciation for Maroš Šefčovič and his team.

Over the last number of years, he has worked steadfastly to understand and address concerns that have been raised around the Protocol.

He has spent many hours engaging with stakeholders across this island - including members of the Oireachtas.

The agreement concluded yesterday arose in large part to his patience and tenacity and his commitment to delivering for citizens in Northern Ireland.

Chairman, colleagues,

In closing, I would like to return to the theme of support for multilateralism.

One of the most interesting discussions we had at the Council earlier this month was on climate and energy diplomacy.

It is a priority for all of us to improve the EU's outreach to partners on climate and energy issues.

No issue highlights the need for effective multilateralism more than the global fight against climate change.

The EU needs to lead from the front on this. We need to ensure that COP28 in Abu Dhabi later this year delivers ambitious results.

And we urgently need to increase climate finance beyond the level of that provided by traditional donors, and to push for reform of the multilateral development banks.

I had the opportunity to also discuss some of these issues at the Munich Security Conference with US Climate Envoy John Kerry, and with the Chair of COP28, Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber.

Ireland is a founder member of a grouping of Member States at the Foreign Affairs Council that are pushing for a more ambitious EU approach to climate diplomacy.

I am heartened to see that support for this issue is growing across the Union.

I look forward to the publication of a Joint Communication shortly on these issues by the EEAS and the Commission. This will be an important step in raising our ambition.

I said at the outset that multilateralism is at the core of Ireland's values and interests.

As we end our tenure on the Council, we take up another vital baton at the UN. Together with Qatar, Ireland has been chosen to co-facilitate negotiations for the political declaration of the Summit on the Sustainable Development Goals.

This Summit, which takes place in September, comes at the midway point between the adoption by the international community of the SDGs in 2015, which Ireland co-facilitated along with Kenya, and the date identified for their fulfilment – 2030.

It is no secret that we are nowhere near fulfilling the global goals we set for ourselves 8 years ago.

September's Summit will be a crucial moment to re-energise global efforts and send a signal that we are firmly committed to getting back on track.

I look forward to keeping the Committee informed of our progress on this in the coming months.

Thank you.