

Remarks by Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Informal Meeting of EU Ministers of Defence

Check against delivery!

First of all, I would like to start by thanking Carmelo [Abela, Minister for Home Affairs and National Security of Malta] personally and the Maltese Presidency for an excellent welcoming to all the Ministers but also for – beyond wonderful hospitality – an excellent preparation of our meetings yesterday and today. This goes both for content and follow-up, because as the minister mentioned the issues we discussed today and yesterday with the ministers of defence are part of a process both when we look at the work we are doing around Libya and when we are looking at our work to strengthen the European Union's defence and security work. This is something that is part of a bigger picture that is very much result of the work that the presidency has done together with other European Union institutions and Member States.

I would like also to thank you for an excellent debrief. Actually there would be little for me to complement: You were extremely complete in reporting about all the issues of our discussions today and also the visit and the meetings yesterday on the flagship of [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia. I would just stress two additional points or underline two political elements of what we discussed.

One, I will start from the last two sessions we had when it comes to the European Security and Defence Package. You might remember at the end of last year the European Council under our proposal adopted decisions that were extremely ambitious to push forward the agenda for more European Union defence and security. We have been working hard both to prepare that decision in December but most of all to make it operational afterwards. In Rome, on 25 March during the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome the need to be consistent and move forward on the European Union defence and security cooperation was a very relevant part of the leaders' deliberations – simply because we see the demand for European Union defence and security work and because our citizens understand that there is a clear European Union added-value in this field because of the economies of scale, because of the cross borders challenges we are facing and because only as the European Union we have the leverage both on the soft and on the hard power that can work when it comes to security and defence for the European Union.

So what we have done today with the defence ministers has been to review the different fields where we have decided to move forward on the European Union defence work: on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO); on the mechanisms to synchronise our defence budgets among Member States; on the European Defence Action Plan (EDAP), meaning mainly the European fund to

finance both research and capability development with a European funding that can be used by Member States to support cooperative projects; and also the issue of the deployability of the Battlegroups – rapid reaction forces that the European Union has for 10 years now, that have made us work well in terms of being able to work together, among Member States and countries that were not used to make their armed forces work together in a connected and interoperable manner. But now with crises we have around us we hear from our partners, starting from the UN and the head of the Peacekeeping Operations in the UN [Jean-Pierre Lacroix] that a rapid reaction force from the European Union would be needed to be deployed in some crisis areas.

So, we have looked in particular at ways in which we can overcome some of the obstacles to deploy our Battlegroups, in particular when it comes to financing their deployment. And after the discussions we have had today with the defence ministers – you know it is an informal meeting, so it was not set up for taking decisions formally – we will come back to a formal setup of the [Foreign Affairs] Council with the defence ministers on 18 May, both on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), on the mechanism to coordinate our defence budgets and on the deployability of the Battlegroups. All of this will come back on 18 May with what I would expect to be a substantial decision – with [Foreign Affairs] Council conclusions – that can then prepare the ground for heads of state and government in June, or later this year if they wish so, to take bold decisions on how we can deliver on the Europe of defence and security.

Let me stress that this is one of the fields where the European Union integration – this year, 60 years after the Rome Treaties, but also the year when we launched the Brexit negotiations, as you might have noticed in these days – is advancing the most and I think is going to advance the most, including towards the end of the Maltese presidency [of the European Council] and then the end of the year.

I would stress the fact that on Libya we have discussed not only our [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia, our work at sea, but also we have gone through the rest of the work we are doing. Both politically to support the political solution of the crisis in Libya through our presence in the Quartet, together with the United Nations, the Arab League and the African Union to try and accompany different Libyan stakeholders in the framework of the Libyan political agreement, so that Libya can come together and unite and face the challenges, first of all of terrorism, but also take the opportunities of a country that is a rich country if it manages to overcome some of its difficulties. We will have a further meeting of the Quartet on Libya in Brussels towards the end of May and it is always important for us to take the different aspects of our work with our Libyan friends and not only one.

I have updated the ministers on the other work we are doing on security with Libyans and around Libya, beyond [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia. First of all we have a presence working on EUBAM [EU Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission] Libya, working on the strengthening of the capacity of the Libyan authorities especially when it comes to civilian security, justice system, boarder management ad aspects that need to be strengthened there but

also the work we are doing south of Libya, with our friends in the Sahel, with our African partners to manage both the security angles but also the migration flows angles into Libya.

The situation is still very difficult, but we have seen some steps in the good direction. So I have registered today a very broad consensus among Member States on the need to continue with our overall work with Libya both at sea and at land, political and security and also humanitarian because we have € 120 million package that is being implemented inside Libya when it comes to support to the population; plus a € 90 million package when it comes to support to the IOM [International Organisation for Migration] and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], in particular to operate within the country to save and protect human lives, but also to work on voluntary returns from Libya to countries of origin.

I have seen, as I said, a very strong support to continue along this path – political, security, inside and outside Libya, at sea and southern Libya, – and also we will have the opportunity in the coming weeks to review strategically as we say both the [EUNAVFOR MED] Operation Sophia and EUBAM work and I believe there is an appetite, a desire from Member States to strengthen some of the fields of work of our operations and missions around that.

One last word – sorry it was longer than foreseen: It was very important for us to have today with us both the NATO Secretary General [*Jens Stoltenberg*] and the UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations [*Jean-Pierre Lacroix*]. Both NATO and the UN are key partners for us when it comes to security and defence. With NATO, as you know, we are implementing 42 measures of concrete cooperation. Jens Stoltenberg and myself will report to our respective Councils in the month of June about the results of this. It is very concrete operations, including cooperation at sea in the Mediterranean but also exchange of information, or work on hybrid threats, or cyber.

And I would like to finish by stressing the relevance we attach to the work of the United Nations when it comes to peacekeeping but also conflict prevention. The European Union is for sure the soft power in the world by definition. As you see, we are developing more and more our hard power, but always in a context of conflict prevention, crisis management and what we call an integrated approach to security. I would say human security more than hard security.

And this is something that puts us and the United Nations exactly on the same page. When we do peacekeeping with the United Nations, when we do humanitarian aid, when we do development cooperation, even when we do climate change work, this is for us part of security. It is not military, it is not hard power, it is not defence properly but it is part of security and for us the work of the United Nations is key in this respect and this is something that it is also important to underline politically in these times. And this is also something we discuss with our partners in the world. I stop here and I am sorry I was too long, but it was an intense couple of days of meetings.

Q&A

Q. On Libya, I wondered when you might consider delivering equipment to the Libyans? On EU Defence, when it comes to PESCO there are some who say that PESCO should include everyone and others who say it should only include countries that can bring something operationally to the structure. Where do you stand?

On Libya, we have discussed this also with the ministers today, as we have concluded the first round of training for the Libyan coastguards and navy and are continuing aiming at a larger number of trainees. We are looking at ways in which we can follow this up in terms of providing non-military assets that would enable those that we have trained to do their job in the Libyan territorial waters. So we are currently already looking at the assets that might be required, assessing the needs, the sustainability and the correct and proper use they can be devoted to. So this is an ongoing process already. By the way, bilaterally for sure one Member State is already delivering vessels, you know about Italy, and today we convened informally, that the European Union will look at these requirements in terms of assets, assessing the real needs and controlling every single step along the chain, because we want to make always sure that we trained the right people, we deliver the right assets to the right people and we follow-up monitoring closely how these assets are then used. We are already looking at that.

On the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), I can tell you very openly that there is not such a division. And you know I am always asked two things from journalists: if I am concerned about something or if we are divided about something. Concerned, there are a lot of reasons for concerns in these times, divisions not really, the amazing thing for me, and this is the result of a very responsible leadership in Member States, especially on Foreign and Security Policy, I would say, and defence. We have advanced on European defence in these last nine months, united, still at 28, doing more and taking more decisions in these last nine months than in the previous decades. And when we started, less than one year ago, everybody was saying: where are you going? You know, there is Brexit, there are divisions. It is the field for divisions by definition. Also on the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the work we are preparing is a very cautious one, because we are entering into a field of the treaties that has never been translated into reality, so we know that we have to build a very solid basis, get it right, make it useful, inclusive but operational. At the same time, and I have seen consensus around the table today, there is the need of having it ambitious and operational, it has to bring added value to our toolbox when it comes to defence and at the same time be modular enough, flexible enough, so that all the Member States that want and have something to contribute with can be part of it. And I am extremely positive about the fact that in the coming weeks we will be ready to propose a defined set-up for eventually a political decision to launch it.

Q. What is your reaction to the shocking allegations made by the Mayor and Prosecutor in Sicily that NGOs are colluding with traffickers in Libya, they are being aided and he said he has evidence they help them to travel illegally from the Mediterranean basin?

On my side, I will not comment comments of the prosecutor. What we work on, on our side, with our operation at sea is crystal clear – it is fighting the

smugglers, ceasing the vessels, giving to the justice mechanism and authorities the suspected smugglers and saving lives as an effect of our presence in international waters. Plus training the Libyan coastguards through the internationally recognised authorities and contributing to the arms embargo to implement a UN Security Council resolution. This is the work we are doing and I respond for the work we are doing.

We have contacts that we have established with all the actors and stakeholders that are active around the Central Mediterranean Route, including some of the NGOs, with the purpose of sharing our approach and also information in terms of who does what in the same area. But obviously it is not for me neither to comment on comments and especially those that are coming from judiciary authorities of one of the Member States and it is not for me, obviously, to either comment or take responsibility or take a position on the activities of NGOs.

We do not have as European Union evidence of that kind, but again I stick to the work we are doing: we are fighting the smugglers, we are also saving lives at sea and we are training the Libyan coastguards to try and have an effective work in the Libyan waters. Because this is the key today: we have seen that people dying at sea are moving closer to the coasts of Libya, an area where the European Union operation is not present and we will need the Libyan coastguard to operate in order to be effective exactly to dismantle the traffickers' networks.

Q: Tomorrow, we understand that the Turkish Foreign Minister will be here to represent his country as a candidate country for the EU. What do you propose to tell him in light of recent mass arrests in Turkey? Secondly, on North Korea: Washington has said overnight that it was prepared to talk about a negotiated solution in North Korea but was also ready to extend sanctions. Is the EU ready to extend sanctions against North Korea as well?

I was here yesterday and here today, I will be here tomorrow and I guess you will be as well, and we have a foreign ministers meeting tomorrow exactly dealing with the situation in Turkey, I will answer that question tomorrow, if you do not mind. Also because otherwise, I know very well how the rule of the game is, it overshadows all the rest we have been doing today on defence, which is very important.

And also on North Korea I can come back on that tomorrow. But I can say that the European Union, I believe, was the last one to adopt not only restrictive measures that are implementing UN Security Council resolutions, but also to adopt autonomous restrictive measures and that was just a couple of weeks ago. This is something we discussed at the G7 [*Foreign Ministers*] Ministerial just at the beginning of April in Italy.

Q: You have told us a lot about cooperation with Libya. Do you have or do you envisage, or would you wish for more military cooperation with the other North African countries and those around the Middle East? And would this also include talking to the American military facilities of which there are about 10, I think, in the Middle East and a big base in Djibouti? And secondly, did you have a preliminary talk with the British representative about post-Brexit

cooperation on security matters?

As long as the UK is a Member State, is a Member State, I do not need to negotiate or discuss our security or defence situation because they are a full part of our deliberations. You know, I chair three formations of the Council: defence ministers, foreign ministers and development cooperation ministers. We are 28. And as long as we are 28 there is no separate channel, there is no separate role. The UK is a full part of what we are doing, especially on foreign and security and defence issues. And this was the case also today and this is going to be the case still for at least a couple of years.

On the future of our cooperation on security, foreign policy and defence, that will be a conversation we will have later on. But for the moment, they are a Member State, they will continue to be a Member State, and this is true also on foreign and security policy.

When it comes to cooperation with both Arab countries but also with our American friends: Our level of interaction is not with single basis but it is on the political level and on the military level and this is always ongoing. Both with the US – General Secretary of Defence [James] Mattis, but also National Security Advisor [H. R.] McMaster, obviously [Secretary of State Rex] Tillerson, Vice-President [Mike] Pence -, we often discuss about security and defence and related issues that are also related to our foreign policy work. Cooperation and coordination with them is ongoing as well as it is with most of our partners in North Africa and the Middle East. It is, I would say, on the level of cooperation with some of our partners, with whom we coordinate the most. Especially when it comes to Libya, our work is mainly with the neighbouring countries – Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, but also the Sahel countries – and with the UN, the Arab League and the African Union. But also on other crises we coordinate closely with other Arab partners. I think of the work we are doing on Syria, where we have a regional initiative led by the European Union where we bring together eight regional countries from Lebanon to Egypt, from Jordan to Iran, to Saudi Arabia, to Qatar, to explore possible ways of supporting the intra-Syrian talks. So, our contacts both on the political but also on the security level with all our Arab partners are very intense.

Two questions on PESCO [Permanent Structured Cooperation], if I have rightly understood the decision to launch the cooperation could be taken at the European Council in June, or before, or after? I have some difficulties to see concretely how this cooperation could have an added value. I understand it is a political step, but in concrete terms for European defence what projects could be implemented? On the Battlegroups, if I may, all the Member States agree to have more common financial engagement to the Battlegroups? Or is it an ongoing process? And one question for the French: have you said goodbye to Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French Minister, or just “we hope to see you again in a new meeting”?

Les deux. En effet il a dit au revoir, on l’a remercié parce que les résultats que nous avons eus dans cette dernière période dans le domaine de la défense et de la sécurité au niveau de l’Union européenne sont aussi grâce

à la France et au travail du Ministre Le Drian et il a dit au revoir et on s'est dit peut-être à bientôt mais cela dépend d'autres dynamiques que je ne veux pas nécessairement commenter ici, qui ne sont pas liées à la défense européenne mais plutôt à un calendrier électoral dans un des pays-membres.

Going back to your defence related questions on the Battlegroups, we are working to, as I said, remove some of the obstacles that have not allowed so far to deploy the Battlegroups even when there would have been a need to do so, or an opportunity to do so. We are working. This is an informal set-up of the Council so we are not expected to take decisions today but to prepare the ground for further decisions to come. You are familiar enough with the European defence mechanism to know that one of the issues is the review of the Athena mechanism and we are working in that direction.

When it comes to Permanent Structured Cooperation, I think it is possible to take a decision or to prepare the ground – which is my job – for a political decision to be taken even within this year to launch a Permanent Structured Cooperation, which is in itself a political statement, which would be the European Union is ready to continue its integration process, its cooperation in the key fields where the European citizens see the added value of the Union starting from defence. So, a political statement in itself, but also and to me even before that has to be a very concrete, practical added value to our work on defence and security.

So, you do not see the projects today, also because we are working on it, but the eventual launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation would obviously indicate clearly which are the concrete projects – the output let's say – of a Permanent Structured Cooperation. It is not what we are doing in terms of preparation of this decision to be taken – again that would be a political decision afterwards – but in the meantime we need to prepare the ground and again translate the articles of the treaty into a serious and solid option for decision-making; has to and will have to be based on very concrete, practical projects that would be useful to advance the European Union defence capabilities and some of the Member States', depending on how modular and flexible this can be.

So, we are not working on a political declaration. We are working on something operational.

Q. [inaudible follow-up question]

I would not say that. To me the main point is that: you have seen, we have worked very fast, one year ago all of this did not exist. We adopted the Global Strategy last end of June, we started the work to implement the Global Strategy on Security and Defence issues at the previous informal Defence Ministers meeting in Bratislava, in September. We had European Council decisions prepared by Defence and Foreign Ministers, together adopted in December; we took the first operational decisions in that field already in March, but she said May – Defence and Foreign Ministers again – so the rhythm is that every one, two months, we have further steps in very operational and concrete terms.

It is important the speed, it is important the pace but it is also very important the quality of the work we are doing because as you know very well, we are talking about steps in the field of European defence that have been for long decades an issue of divergence that is not the case anymore, but we need to move not only concretely but also with a very solid political basis and operational preparation. This as fast as we can – but priority for me is the quality of the process we have put in place, the quality of the outcome that we would present for political decisions and the level of consensus that so far we have managed to build.

So, we will continue in this direction. It can be for the next months, it can be for the end of the year, it can be also for next year. But I am positive that this process is up and running and bringing good results, with a pace that I have to tell you personally I wish was there also in other fields of the European Union integration process. On defence, we are doing well, we are running fast, with good results and with a level of unity that is quite amazing. My personal view is that we would need to do exactly the same in other fields, but this is not for us to discuss today.

[Anti-poverty effort wins world's plaudits](#)



Fabric artist Duan Yinkai (right) speaks to foreign guests who attended a meeting in Beijing on China's poverty alleviation efforts on Thursday. [Photo/China Daily]

Foreign governmental and private representatives lauded China's progress in poverty reduction as the International Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee hosted an event in Beijing showing how the country has done it.

The event, using the example of the CPC Yunnan provincial committee since 2012, attracted about 400 diplomats, foreign politicians and representatives of international organizations on Thursday.

"China's tremendous success in lifting the majority of the underprivileged people out of poverty in over a little more than 30 years is a feat that is unparalleled and truly inspiring," said Mark van den Boogaard, senior policy adviser for the United Nations Development Programme.

Van den Boogaard, who has recently returned from a research trip to Yunnan, said the country's goal to pull all people out of poverty by 2020 is "ambitious" but "realistic".

"From what we have seen in the north of Yunnan, under the leadership of the CPC, the Chinese authorities are clearly on the right track." Van den Boogaard cited the "duel approach" of targeted poverty reduction and intervention on one hand, and the nation's idea of leaving no one behind on the other.

Lennart Nilsson, counselor for agricultural affairs with the Swedish embassy, said the figures for China's poverty relief are impressive.

"Yunnan province has a fantastic environment. It is also important for the authorities to preserve the ethnic culture and protect the environment during the poverty reduction process," he said.

Song Tao, head of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, said at the event that the CPC is willing to share its experience in poverty reduction with the international community and help its neighbors and developing countries to explore their own ways to eradicate poverty.

"Facts have shown that the fundamental strategies by General Secretary Xi Jinping on targeted poverty alleviation are the golden key for China to realize its poverty eradication targets," he said.

China lifted 55.6 million people out of poverty between 2013 and 2016.

However, more than 40 million still live in poverty, which means that in the coming four years, China would have to pull an average of 10 million people each year out of poverty to reach its target of eradicating poverty by 2020, according to the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

Chen Hao, secretary of the CPC Yunnan provincial committee, said provincial authorities have prioritized the preservation of the traditional culture of ethnic groups and the protection of the ecology and environment while reducing poverty. Yunnan's environmental efforts are crucial since it is the source of a number of important national and international rivers, he said.

The province has managed to reduce its impoverished population from 8 million in 2012 to 3.6 million in 2016.

Chinese bombard Denmark with oyster crisis solutions



Oysters wreak havoc on Denmark's seashore. [Photo/Weibo.com]

Danish people would never expect that the oyster crisis confronting their country may turn into a food-lovers' bonanza in China. The European country's dilemma may be the last thing Chinese people would ever understand as they see the abundance of seafood as a treat, rather than a problem.

The Danish Embassy published a story on Monday evening on its official Sina Weibo account, China's twitter-like social network, about the problems for their country caused by an invasion of the exotic oysters. Chinese internet users enthusiastically responded with much discussion about ways to address the issue on Weibo, then WeChat, another popular social media network.

The embassy makes a small joke in the post to invite Chinese people to eat oysters in Denmark which triggered heated debate. Apparently, when it comes to eating, Chinese people are very serious and they already started to make plans for their oyster journey.

The most popular comment came from someone suggesting oyster visas should be

issued “with 10 years’ unlimited round trips and one-month-long stay and I can eat up them all in five years” received over 10,000 likes. There are people even recommending visa-free and oyster immigration policies in China.

The oysters, known as Pacific oysters, are a new species in Denmark and have caused huge damage to the seashore’s ecological environment. Their proliferation is unstoppable since they have no natural enemies there. People have to get across them in shoes before swimming. What’s worse, their occupation leads to the endangerment of the Limfjord, a Danish local oyster.

Scientists and fishermen made numerous complaints to the nation’s conservation authority but the thorny issue remains unsolved. They also encouraged local people to bring them to their dining tables and few were motivated.

The Danish Embassy is very grateful for Chinese people’s innovative advice such as building oyster sauce factories and organizing oyster-dining journeys. It also said as long as China permits, they’d love to export oysters to China.

[Anti-graft agency hunts 946 fugitives](#)

China’s top graft buster said on Thursday that 946 corrupt fugitives are still at large in foreign countries, and China hopes those nations will support its war against corruption.

Thursday’s disclosure was the first time China has released the exact number of corrupt fugitives abroad.

Of the 946, most of whom are corrupt officials, Chinese law enforcement officers have a good idea of where 365 are. But the whereabouts of the other 581 are unknown, according to the Communist Party of China’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

“These corrupt fugitives used illegal means to grab a large amount of public funds and escaped abroad to avoid punishment, which has seriously harmed people’s interests and undermined our credibility and social justice,” said Liu Jianchao, director of the CCDI’s International Cooperation Bureau.

“We hope the public will provide clues about the fugitives, as well as report corrupt officials who intend to flee,” he said.

Liu also called for countries harboring such fugitives to adhere to international conventions on fighting corruption and actively assist Chinese law enforcement authorities.

Feng Jingyou, a senior official in the CCDI’s International Cooperation

Bureau, said China respects different legal systems in other countries, but hopes that such countries would not shelter corrupt Chinese fugitives, nor facilitate their asset transfers.

“We urge some individual countries—which have ignored the suspects’ corruption crimes and issued them visas under investment immigration policies in return for economic benefits—to tighten the management of visas and revoke the visas already issued,” Feng said.

Liu said the fugitives should return to China to confess their crimes and seek lenient punishment as soon as possible. “We have the resolve and ability to uphold the law, ... and we’ll make every effort to bring them back to face justice, and never will allow them to get away with no legal penalty.”

In recent years, a large number of corrupt Chinese officials have escaped abroad, especially to the United States and Canada, because of a lack of extradition treaties and legal differences, Liu said. Some of them have obtained permanent residence in those countries, he said.

“We hope that overseas Chinese and foreign friends recognize the nature of these fugitives and expose them to drive them away,” Liu said.

China launched a massive crackdown on corruption in November 2012 and in 2014 started an operation called Sky Net to hunt for corrupt fugitives abroad.

In April 2015, Interpol issued “red notices”—requests to locate and provisionally arrest an individual pending repatriation—for the 100 most-wanted corrupt Chinese officials. So far, 40 have returned from more than 16 countries and regions, while half of the remaining fugitives are still on the run in Western countries, CCDI figures show.

On Thursday, the CCDI also made public detailed information about 22 high-profile Chinese fugitives, 15 of whom are in the US and Canada. The information included suspects’ photos, ID numbers, passport numbers, suspected crimes, the date they fled China and their suspected current location.

The 22 people are considered high priority cases because of the difficulty that Chinese law enforcement authorities have encountered in their attempts to locate and return them, according to the CCDI.

[China’s cargo spacecraft completes in-orbit refueling](#)

China’s Tianzhou-1 cargo spacecraft and Tiangong-2 space lab completed their first in-orbit refueling at 7:07 p.m. Thursday, another success of the

Tianzhou-1 mission.

Mastering the technique of refueling in space will help the country to build a permanent space station.

China is the third country, besides Russia and the United States, to master refueling in space.

The in-orbit refueling, under control of technicians on Earth, takes about five days, as the propellant is transmitted from the cargo spacecraft to the space lab.

A second refueling in space will be conducted after the cargo ship's second docking with the space lab in June, which aims to test the ability of the cargo ship to dock with the space station from different directions.

In the last docking, Tianzhou-1 will use fast-docking technology. Previously, it took China about two days to dock, while fast docking will take about six hours, according to Bai Mingsheng, chief designer of the cargo ship.

Tianzhou-1, China's first cargo spacecraft, was launched on April 20 from Wenchang Space Launch Center in south China's Hainan Province.

It completed its first automated docking with the orbiting Tiangong-2 space lab on April 22.

The Central Military Commission (CMC) sent a congratulatory letter to the staff of China's manned space program on the success of the Tianzhou-1 mission, speaking highly of the contributions they have made to the country's space industry.

"It means a lot in realizing our unremitting space dream, and will inspire us to break new ground," the CMC said in the letter.

In 1992, the central authority approved a three-step manned space program, with the final step marking the ability to operate a permanent manned space station, which is planned to be put into orbit around 2022.

As the International Space Station is set to retire in 2024, the Chinese space station will offer a promising alternative, and China will be the only country with a permanent space station.