

Remarks by Federica Mogherini upon arrival at the informal meeting of the EU Ministers of Defence

Check against delivery!

Good morning, today we will have a quite intense meeting with the Defence Ministers also welcoming the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg] and the Head of the UN [United Nations] Peacekeeping Operations [Jean-Pierre Lacroix] – strong partners with whom we work very intensively.

We will have a session on Libya and our work in and around Libya at sea. Yesterday, we were visiting the flagship of Operation Sophia to fight the smugglers' networks but also to train the Libyan coastguards. Inside Libya, we have work ongoing to strengthen the capacity of the authorities of Libya, especially on the control of the territory and the reforms they have to make. Also the work we are doing south of Libya with our partners in the Sahel because we know very well that be it on migration, be it on security, counterterrorism or the smuggling of arms, there is work to be done at the southern border with the desert. And this is the work we are doing especially with Niger, with Chad, with Mali.

So, we will discuss with the Ministers this approach in different manners and then we will move to another very important point which is the continuation of the work we are doing to strengthen European defence and security. As you know, this is a work we have launched last year already with the Global Strategy [the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy] and then, in the last eight, nine months, we have moved quite fast and quite far on strengthening the European defence.

Today we will discuss with Ministers in an informal manner, so do not expect decisions to be taken, it is not the setting for that, but we will discuss how to move forward on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), on the use of Battlegroups, on the fund that the [European] Commission is preparing to support the European defence, both on capabilities and on research and industry. So it will be, I believe, not only stocktaking but also a strong push to develop this European defence chapter about cooperation and integration that was indicated also in Rome when we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Treaties as one of the main fields where the European Union will move on in the next years.

Q. You said yesterday that the EU was ready to provide ships to the Libyan coastguards. When could this start and what form could it take? Which countries will contribute?

Too early to say that. We are assessing the needs. We have for the moment, as I said yesterday, trained around 100 Libyan coast guards and navy. We are now

assessing together with the Libyan authorities the needs and this is a process that will take place in the next months. And I know that some countries bilaterally – for example Italy – are just now starting to provide or considering to provide some vessels for patrolling the Libyan territorial waters. But this will be a European common effort.

Q. How much progress can you make on EU defence when France is still choosing a President?

Well, that is a process that will be concluded in a couple of weeks from now. So I do not see any problem with the political calendar on that. We have moved very consistently and very fast and united on this file. I would just mention the fact that in March we took important decisions on military capabilities to be together conducted and run in Brussels – and people were sceptical about the possibility of us moving still at 28, and still we have done it.

So, I am very confident that the chapter of the European defence will continue to move forward, in a very concrete, constructive and united manner – no matter about the political calendar that obviously is important in France as in all other EU Member States. I see this as a clear priority for all. And by the way, if you ask not only the governments but if you ask the European citizens, the European citizens clearly indicate the field of foreign policy, security and defence as the field where the European Union added value is absolutely not in discussion. They want to see more European Union in the field of foreign policy, security and defence – and this is what we are doing.

Q. Is it possible to equip the Libyan coast guards with weapons?

We are talking about non-military equipment.

Q. Is there still a possibility that Operation Sophia goes into the territorial waters of Libya?

This would require an invitation from the Libyan authorities and a UN Security Council resolution. What we have achieved in international waters would now be useful to achieve in Libyan territorial waters, both in terms of dismantling the traffickers' network but also in terms of saving lives. You know that most of the tragedies now take place close to the Libyan coast. What we are currently doing is trying to empower the Libyans to do this work in Libyan territorial waters. This would allow us to solve the problem of smugglers and save lives without necessarily entering ourselves in the Libyan waters. Our objective is not in itself being in the territorial waters of Libya, our objective is that in the territorial waters of Libya the work is done. If it is done by the Libyans, it is even better.

Q. But is this partner reliable enough?

It is the partner with whom we are working. It is the Government of National Accord that is internationally recognised and we are trying to do all we can to strengthen their capacity. We are also working with

municipalities and with others in the country. For us what is important is this: that there is the legitimacy from the international perspective and, on the other side, that there is the political work in Libya. This is maybe less for the Defence Ministers to discuss but it is very much for us to do. I will debrief the Ministers also of the fact that we are intensifying our work, especially with the Arab League and the African Union and the UN to push for a political inclusive process in Libya that allows, that would allow the east and the west and the south to come together and Libyans themselves to find a way to avoid fighting each other and uniting together to fight terrorism. This is the effort that on the political side we are committed to do and we will continue to discuss this.