

Statement to Parliament: PM Commons statement on June European Council: 2 July 2018

Introduction

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a Statement on last week's European Council.

The focus of this Council was on migration – and there were also important conclusions on security and defence.

The UK made a substantive contribution to both. And our continued co-operation after we have left the EU will be in everyone's interests, helping to ensure the long-term prosperity and security of the whole continent.

Migration

Mr Speaker, the consequences of mass uncontrolled immigration are one of the most serious challenges confronting Europe today.

The problem is felt especially acutely by countries on the Mediterranean and the Aegean that are often where migrants first arrive.

But this is a shared challenge, which affects us all.

More than anything the situation is a tragedy for the migrants themselves – thousands of whom have now lost their lives.

And at the core of all our efforts must be trying to prevent others from doing so.

The UK has long argued for a comprehensive, whole-of-route approach to tackling migration, and the Council agreed actions in each of the three areas that we have championed.

First, there will be more work upstream to reduce the number of people who undertake such perilous journeys in the first place.

This includes providing more opportunities in the countries where economic migrants are coming from. And helping ensure that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

To support this, the UK will continue to invest for the long term in education, jobs and services – both in countries of origin and transit.

We are also committed to the second tranche of the EU's Facility for Refugees in Turkey, provided we can agree an appropriate mechanism for managing the

funds.

And we made a further commitment at this Council of 15 million euros to support the EU Trust Fund for Africa.

Both are delivering on the UK's call for more support for countries of transit and origin on the main routes into Europe – which is vital if we are to achieve the solutions we need to mass uncontrolled migration.

Alongside our economic development and humanitarian support, we have also been stepping up our communications effort upstream, so that more potential migrants understand the grave dangers of the journeys they might undertake – and the criminal people smugglers who are waiting to exploit them.

Second, there will be more work to distinguish between genuine refugees and illegal economic migrants.

This includes exploring the concept of regional disembarkation platforms. It was agreed at the Council that these could be established on a voluntary basis. Key to their success would be operating in full respect of international law and without creating a pull factor for further migration.

There is clearly much more work to be done with the support of UNHCR and the IOM to establish whether such proposals are practically and legally viable.

But we do need to be prepared to look again at new solutions given the gravity and intractability of this challenge.

Third, there will be further efforts to strengthen borders to help prevent illegal migration.

Last week I agreed with Prime Minister Tsipras of Greece that we would work towards a new action plan of UK support for Greek and European efforts, including a further Border Force patrol vessel to work with the Greek Coast Guard.

The UK now has law enforcement officers in 17 EU and African countries as part of our Organised Immigration Crime Task Force.

UK and French officers are also working together to build links between counter-trafficking agencies in Nigeria and Niger to strengthen this key border on the Central route.

And I am keen that we should replicate this model with other states.

Mr Speaker this is a challenge that faces the whole of our continent.

And as I said at the Council, we will continue playing our full part in working together with the EU to meet it – both now and after we have left.

For that is in our national interest – and in the interests of Europe as a whole.

##Security and defence

The same is true for security and defence – which is why at this Council I made the case for a new security partnership between the UK and the EU after we have left.

We have seen over recent weeks and months that Russia and other hostile state and non-state actors are trying to sow disunity, destabilise our democracies and test our resolve.

So we must work together to adapt our current defences to the new normal and take responsibility for protecting international norms and institutions.

In this context, I thanked our European partners for their solidarity in the wake of the appalling nerve agent attack in Salisbury.

The unprecedented co-ordinated expulsion of undeclared Russian intelligence officers demonstrated our unity in response to this kind of disregard for global norms and rules, which poses a threat to us all.

And at the March Council we agreed to do more to strengthen our resilience against such threats.

Since then the UK has led work with our European partners to propose a package of measures to step up our strategic communications against online disinformation, strengthen our capabilities against cybersecurity threats and further reduce the threat from hostile intelligence activities.

This Council agreed measures in all of these areas, including an Action Plan by December which must go even further in co-ordinating our response to the challenge of disinformation.

This effort to adapt our defences to protecting international norms should also enable us to respond robustly to events beyond Europe when they threaten our security interests.

So this Council welcomed the agreement reached by my Rt Hon Friend the Foreign Secretary in the Hague last week, enabling the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons use.

And the Council reinforced this by agreeing with President Macron and myself in calling for the adoption of a new EU sanctions regime to address the use and proliferation of chemical weapons.

The Council also agreed to roll over current sanctions on Russia in light of its failure to fully implement the Minsk Agreements in Ukraine.

In the context of online threats from the full range of state and non-state actors, President Macron and I joined together in pushing for further action to tackle illegal content, especially terrorist content, online.

Finally on security, Mr Speaker, we looked ahead to the NATO Summit next

week, which will be an important moment to demonstrate Western unity.

The NATO Secretary General joined this discussion at the Council where we agreed that Europe must take greater responsibility for its own security while complementing and reinforcing the activities of NATO.

Far too few of our allies are currently meeting the commitment to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defence.

And at this Council, I urged them to do so, in order that, together, we can meet the full range of targets that challenge our interests.

Mr Speaker, for our own part, we have the biggest defence budget in Europe and the biggest in NATO, after the United States.

We are investing more than £179 billion on new equipment. That means, among other items, new aircraft carriers and submarines for the Navy, new cutting edge F35B aircraft for the RAF and new Ajax armoured vehicles for the Army.

We are leading throughout NATO – whether that is deployed forces in the Mediterranean, air policing in Eastern Europe or our troops providing an enhanced forward presence in Estonia.

And we are operating with our allies to defend our interests all over the world.

In April, RAF aircraft took action to degrade the Syrian Regime's chemical weapons capability and deter their future use.

Over 1000 personnel are deployed in the fight against Daesh – and we are the second largest contributor to the coalition air campaign in Iraq and Syria.

In Africa, UK troops have built and now operate a hospital in South Sudan supporting the UN mission there; they are training security forces in Nigeria, and our Chinook helicopters are deploying to Mali in support of the French this week.

Two Royal Navy vessels are deployed in Asia in support of sanctions enforcement on North Korea, working closely with the US, Japan and others – with another to follow, the first Royal Navy deployments to the Pacific since 2013.

Our submarines are silently patrolling the seas giving us a nuclear deterrent every minute of every hour, as they have done for 50 years.

Our Modernising Defence Programme will ensure that our capabilities remain as potent in countering the threats of tomorrow as they are in keeping us safe today.

We are the leading military power in Europe with the capabilities to protect our people, defend our interests, and project our values, supporting the global rules based system.

And the government that I lead will ensure that is exactly how we remain.

Brexit

Turning to Brexit, Mr Speaker, I updated my fellow leaders on the negotiations – and the 27 other Member States welcomed the further progress that had been made on the Withdrawal Agreement.

With the exception of the Protocol relating to Northern Ireland, we now have agreement or are close to doing so.

There remain some real differences between us and the European Commission on Northern Ireland. So Mr Speaker, on the Protocol on Northern Ireland, I want to be very clear. We have put forward proposals, and will produce further proposals, so that if a temporary backstop is needed there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

We are absolutely committed to the avoidance of such a border. And we are equally committed to the avoidance of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is an integral part of our country and we will never accept the imposition of a border within our United Kingdom.

We all agreed that we must now urgently intensify and accelerate the pace of negotiations on our future relationship.

I warned EU leaders that I do not think this Parliament will approve the Withdrawal Agreement in the autumn unless we have clarity about our future relationship alongside it.

I will hold a meeting of the Cabinet at Chequers on Friday and we will publish our White Paper on the future partnership with the EU next week.

The EU and its Member States will want to consider our proposals seriously. We both need to show flexibility to build the deep relationship after we have left that is in the interests of both our peoples.

Our White Paper will set out detailed proposals for a sustainable and close future relationship between the UK and the EU – a partnership that means that the UK will leave the Single Market and Customs Union, but a partnership which supports our shared prosperity and security.

It will mark an important step in delivering the decision of the British people. And I commend this Statement to the House.