Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton 
at the informal meeting of EU Defence Ministers 
Ghent, 23 and 24 September 2010

Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, made the following remarks by videoconference on 23 September:

"Unfortunately I cannot be with you in person at the meeting, but I am nevertheless with you via videoconference from New York.

As an introduction to our debate, I want to make two points very clear:

• First: we need more co-operation in order to continue to deliver in a very difficult budgetary situation.
• Second: we need better and more comprehensive strategies for our CSDP missions.

The challenge is double - on the one hand we are faced with enormous pressure on public finances and defence budgets; I am fully aware that this is a hard time for you. On the other hand, there is a strong demand for the EU to be more active, present - there is a clear sense of this here in New York.

To meet these two challenges, we need to turn the crisis into an opportunity. We need to use possibilities offered by the Lisbon Treaty, develop new innovative ways of collaborating and mobilise the political will required.

In practice, this means that we should focus our spending on our agreed priorities. We need to explore ways of pooling and sharing. Our existing resources need to better fit our needs.
We must exploit the resources at EU level for joint research programmes. Many civilian programmes can also have military uses, like the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles for monitoring the EU's external borders. There is great untapped potential here.

We must make better use of the European Defence Agency to develop new common projects, like the new project on mobile forensic laboratories.

Finally, we need greater complementarity with NATO; there are already promising avenues on how to counter roadside bombs and how to improve medical support. We need to pursue these, and open new ones.

Our taxpayers will expect us to save money wherever we can, but also to continue to be ambitious and active in dealing with the conflicts and challenges that we are confronted with. I think we can rise to this challenge, but it means more work, new ideas, and strong political will.

The second point is about missions - we need better strategies for better missions. We need to aim for value for money and effective delivery on our objectives.

I would like to make three points:

- First, we need to live up to our commitments. We have taken political commitments and our credibility is at stake.

- Secondly, and related to this, we need better political strategies for these missions, which exploit the full range of military and civilian means at our disposal, which take our resource constraints into account and which include clear exit strategies. With the Lisbon Treaty and the European External Action Service, we have a chance to get it right. This is the idea behind the Treaty, now we need to translate this into practice.

- Third, we need to move forward on EU-NATO co-operation in crisis management. I have a mandate from the European Council to work on moving this forward. This is difficult, we know, but we cannot afford not to move forward.