Remarks by Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission, following her meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Washington, D.C., February 17, 2012

Well first of all, can I say what a pleasure it is to be back here and to be meeting and working as closely as I do with you. It is extremely significant that we’re meeting today, because we meet on the back of having received a letter from Dr. Jalili from Iran in response to my letter from October. As you said, we are consulting colleagues and analyzing closely what this letter would mean. Let me say that I think it’s good to see that the letter has arrived and that there is a potential possibility that Iran may be ready to start talks. We’ll continue to discuss and make sure that what we’re looking at is substantive, but I'm cautious and I’m optimistic at the same time for this. It also demonstrates the importance of the twin-track approach, the pressure that we have put on together, the sanctions that have been put there. Because that’s the responsibility of the international community. I believe they’re having an effect. But we, of course, want to resolve this through talks.

We see the things that you’ve seen in the letter – no preconditions and a recognition of what we’ll be talking about. The next question, really, is to look at where we left off in Istanbul. And you’ll recall that we put out in Istanbul a series of options for confidence-building measures, things that Iran could do that would help us move forward with the talks, things that the inspectors would be allowed to do, for example. We also said at that time they could come forward with their own ideas about what they wanted to do, so that this was a genuine open process. So for us, the evaluation now is also about thinking through: okay, where did we leave off, where do we need to go next? If we start the talks, we want to sustain them. Therefore, we need to set in train the process whereby we can be clear what it is we mean to achieve and what we’re expecting from the Iranians. And that’s what we’re in the process of doing right now. When we were talking in Istanbul, there were two sets of issues: one, the confidence-building measures I’ve described; the other was support for the TRR and for, of course, a civil nuclear programme. And that’s been – as I’ve acknowledged to the Iranians recently - that’s always been part of what we were offering, to support them on civil nuclear power.
And as you’ve said, Hillary, the situation in Syria is a cause for enormous concern, and we feel extremely worried about the level of violence and terror that is happening within that country. We’ve been very clear that President Assad should stand aside and should enable a process that would bring the people of Syria together, all of them. An inclusive process that can take the country forward. I want to commend the work of Nabil Elaraby, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, who has shown great leadership in bringing together the Arab community, but in coordination, working closely with the international community, to demonstrate that inclusivity and to demonstrate leadership on the ground. I hope that the meeting next week will give us a chance to consider how we can support humanitarian efforts especially. And I will be working with the UN, the OIC, and the Arab League, as we did through the situation in Libya, on the humanitarian side of the challenges that we face. I hope it will also show, too, the international consensus to try and see the situation in Syria end.

We are absolutely clear that President Assad should stand aside; you cannot kill your own people, you cannot be a leader, and call this leadership. Secondly, that we want to try and work as closely as we can with everyone who’s willing to engage in support of the humanitarian needs of people. And we’ve supported the Arab League in its quest to try and put people on the ground to try and monitor the situation. And as you know, there are discussions going on between the UN and the Arab League about how to take that forward in the future. The honest response is we need to do everything that we possibly can to help.

As you said, there are hundreds of things on our agendas at all times, and we keep in constant touch, so we can deal with only some of them at every meeting. The situation in Serbia-Kosovo, of course, is very important to the European Union because we do believe, as you rightly say, the future for both lies within the European Union. The team that we’ve got there at the moment is working closely together to try and support both into their future. I hope that both will be able to work on the plan that we’ve put to them that will enable Serbia to become a candidate, will enable Kosovo to move forward with visas, with trade, with economic support, and eventually to see its future as well with the European Union. Thank you.