Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Informal Meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers (Gymnich)

First of all can I thank you Villy and the people of Denmark for allowing us to be here on what has been an extremely successful occasion.

The surroundings have been so congenial and so appropriate for us to have our discussions.

These occasions, the “Gymnich”, are an opportunity for Foreign Ministers to talk, perhaps more quietly than usual, and more in depth, about the broader strategic issues that we face.

So I invited ministers to talk this time, as Villy has said, on how effective our foreign policy is now that the European External Action Service is just over a year old, on how we could address more appropriately the issue of human rights, and within that, a discussion on freedom of religion and belief.

And then today to look at the perspective that says on the one hand we have engagement and on the other we have isolation; countries that we want to deal with by imposing sanctions and how we look at that in terms of engaging and promoting the values that we hold dear: democracy, human rights, freedom; as well as of course protecting our own interests.

I think it was a very interesting and successful meeting; everybody spoke, that’s always a good indication. People spoke at length about the issues as they saw them. And within that naturally we talked about the topics that have occupied our minds in the last weeks and the last days.

Syria was obviously top of that agenda. Also the potential for the Iran talks which as you know I will lead. The issues in Belarus that concern us; what is happening in the broader neighbourhood. As you know I have always said that we have the first and primary responsibility to our neighbourhood. How we support countries going through change; how we support change without chaos. The work that is done in developing a comprehensive approach; bringing together the institutions and the member states of Europe to be even more effective in the world.
I think from today we took away a sense that we agree on how we move forward.

There’s a lot we have done and a lot to be done, but there is a sense of unity amongst the European Union that we can achieve that.