Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the AFET Committee, European Parliament

Thank you very much Mr President.

I know that you've just had Helga Schmid speaking to you about the situation in Iran, especially after the rather unexpected victory of Hassan Rohani. We hope that this might create some positive momentum in trying to improve relations between Iran and the rest of the world. We are consulting within the E3+3 on the timing of our next steps, bearing in mind there is the inauguration of the President on the 3rd of August. I thought I would start off by giving you a sense of the Foreign Affairs Council and go through the issues that were discussed at that meeting, and then of course I'm open to any questions and comments you might have.

And I'll begin with Turkey, because I know from our discussions at the plenary session just how much the Parliament has been concerned about events there most recently, especially the way in which the police reacted against peaceful demonstrators. And we stand firm in saying there should be investigations, and those who are responsible should be held accountable. But I also believe that continued engagement with Turkey is the best way to exert leverage, and I spoke several times with Foreign Minister Davutoglu, whom I will meet in the course of the ASEAN Regional Forum next week in Brunei.

We recommended we should try and continue with the EU-Turkey dialogue to make sure, as civil society and opposition voices have said, that we are engaged with them. And to try and make sure that our relationship with Turkey develops on the path that we believe is going to have the greatest potential to ensure that the engagement on the values, the rule of law, human rights, democracy and so on is going to be of even greater importance.

So the General Affairs Council agreed to open Chapter 22, and as you've seen the Inter-Governmental Conference will take place after the presentation of the Commission’s annual progress report this autumn. I think that was a sensible solution to keep the momentum in the process but also recognize the current situation.
The Foreign Affairs Council was of course very keen to build up to the Eastern Partnership Summit that will take place in Vilnius and we've been regularly discussing our relationship with our partners, also because we have the meeting of the Ministers of the Eastern Partnership with the Foreign Affairs Council on the 22nd of July.

The purpose of that will be to show the importance we attach to engaging with our partners in the East, involving them early in the process of preparation for the summit and to encourage a sense of ownership for this summit. The Council was very clear that we need to also think about what we do next, after Vilnius, to be ready to have a strategic debate and to be ambitious on the post-Vilnius roadmap.

You know that we want to have the initialling of the Association Agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, with Moldova, Georgia and Armenia in Vilnius. We think it's realistic to assume that we can get to that initialling.

I don't have to remind anybody in the Parliament that Ukraine has issues that require further progress. We think it is possible to sign the Association Agreement, with the trade part, at Vilnius, provided Ukraine fulfils the benchmarks that have been provided by the Council last December. But we still remain worried about rule of law and selective justice issues. It is important to keep our engagement, important to be clear on our expectations.

We also thought that we'll continue the discussion of engagement in Belarus, especially with civil society, as we move towards Vilnius.

We took some time to talk about climate change as well. I've introduced into the Foreign Affairs Council opportunities for us to discuss what are often called horizontal or global issues. We've had a couple of debates on energy and this time we had our second debate on climate change, and we invited Commissioner Connie Hedegaard to come and talk with us.

We want to make sure that climate change is raised consistently in our discussions with third countries, not just by our delegations or by me, but by all Ministers and it's particularly important for some of our key players - and key emitters like China, US, Russia, India, and many others. I wanted to establish a sense of urgency. It does need to be a part of general foreign policy. I made the point that we have over a hundred fragile states as a direct consequence of what's happening in climate change: Flood or famine, dramatic changes in climate that affect the capacities of those countries to be able to support their citizens, institutions that don't have the capacity to do so.

We also looked at the preparations for the 2015 UN Conference which will take place in Paris, and we agreed with the Commissioner that she will return to us certainly within a year to consider what further we should do. I think the general consensus of all Ministers was that this indeed was something we needed to have firmly on the agenda.

We took some time as well to look at the Middle East Peace Process and we will be going back to this in July to consider whether there has been movement based on the personal engagement and tremendous work that Secretary Kerry is now undertaking.

We reaffirmed as ever our commitment to the two-state solution, and we affirmed our support for the current efforts that are underway. I pointed out to the Council that I was in regular touch with the United States, certainly with Secretary Kerry and his team, and that we wanted to give full support to his efforts, bearing in mind that if he were here he would be the first to say that the EU has a unique contribution to make to these efforts, both politically and economically.
As colleagues know I was in Ramallah and in Jerusalem last week. I met with President Abbas, with his team and I spent a two-hour meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu. I went to Gaza for my fourth visit because it was World Refugee Day and I felt it was important to mark it. The refugees are a huge issue, not just in terms of what happens in Syria but across the world more generally.

And it was encouraging to see the work that we are continuing to fund to support especially children in Gaza, attending summer schools, being supported educationally and economically. But we will revert to this in July when I expect the Council to want to make strong statements on the back of what I hope will be progress by Secretary Kerry.

Over lunch, we invited NATO Secretary General Rasmussen to join us. I regularly attend Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers meetings at NATO and I have regular bilateral meetings, as well as staff meetings, which take place regularly between the two of us.

The specific topic that we wanted to discuss with him is the future of Afghanistan. He reminded us what progress has been made on infrastructure and security in many parts of Afghanistan and welcomed the intensity of the collaboration between us. He pointed out that there has been a transfer of leadership of military operations to Afghan forces with the police and military in the country now numbering about 350,000 people. He set out the main elements of the post-2014 NATO training mission that will be conducted through 5 training centres across the country. And of course he emphasised the need for a clear framework in which NATO and any participating state could be part of that.

Council clearly confirmed the long-term commitment to Afghanistan and the strengthening of regional co-operation. I reminded the Council that I visited Central Asia to discuss with them not only EU-Central Asia relations but also our approach to Afghanistan, under the security dialogue we have begun with Central Asia which is now willing to include Afghanistan, as part of the ongoing work we do with five nations of Central Asia and with Afghanistan.

We also invited Andris Piebalgs, because it is important that we in a comprehensive way think about the future of Afghanistan and point to the need to develop a long-term strategy for EU engagement in Afghanistan post-2014. 2014 is a moment when things will go forward, but it certainly should not be a moment where people think we have disengaged. As all of you have witnessed from recent events, there is much more to do, not least the preparation for the elections next year.

We had a discussion about the Southern Neighbourhood which followed the circulation of the EEAS/Commission paper which looks at what we have been doing to date and puts forward some ideas of how we might go forward. I don't have to remind any member of this Parliament of the magnitude of the challenge in the region and my strong belief that we have to have long-term engagement, not just from the EU, but especially from the EU. I think this was well underlined, as well as the importance of ensuring that we do see progress.

There is a real recognition that much of the work we are doing is supporting civil society in many countries, helping to ensure for example that women do have a voice and that it is heard, helping to develop the institutions of civil society in countries that have not been allowed to have civil society historically. But we are also engaging to try to make sure that even very fragile democracies actually become more effective.
On Syria, we underlined again the efforts that we are making to convene the "Geneva II" conference. Pierre Vimont on my behalf has been meeting Mr Brahimi, and while I was in Egypt, I was speaking with his team. We work every day to try and support the convening of this event as part of the beginning of a process that commits to a transitional government with full executive powers.

But you know, on top of that, there is still this massive humanitarian need. In Jordan and in Lebanon where I visited some of the refugees, there is a massive need to offer support in the short term. And as Vice-President of the Commission we held with the President a meeting to ensure that we were able to offer an additional €400 million in response to the latest UN humanitarian appeal. But it won't be enough and the consequences of this terrible war will one day require us to consider carefully how we are going to help rebuild a nation.

We also reviewed the progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and I want to pay tribute to the Prime Ministers of both for the incredible way in which they have engaged. I have spent over one hundred hours with them in negotiations on top of which 50 people, 25 from each, spent four weeks in my offices working in five working groups on parallel tracks to actually move this dialogue from the stage of wanting to implementation - , to what I call irreversibility.

You will see the police stations are closed, blockades are gone, people are able to arrive to the customs gates without any problem at all and last week the Minister for European Integration of Kosovo made a visit to Belgrade. It is the first time that an official from Kosovo has been in Belgrade freely, visiting, talking and walking around. They now have liaison officers based in our delegations who are specifically there to liaise on a day-to-day basis, so apart from the Prime Ministers' meetings, there is day to day contact now all the time.

The Prime Ministers pointed out to me that they met with me twelve times, but they've also met in New York three times and they made a joint visit to Austria most recently for which I thank the Austrian government.

I believe this process is irreversible. But it still needs to be helped and I hope that the European Council tomorrow will make a good and strong decision, based on the recommendations and the minutes of the General Affairs Council. I'm extremely grateful for all the support I've been given, but I'm always clear it's their work that did this. We were fortunate to be able to help them, but they really have made a massive difference and I pay tribute to them.

We have a lot more to do. I will meet them again on the 8th of July to continue the work. It will not stop until it's all done and there is much more to do to make sure that on the ground this is understood and accepted. Anything that the European Parliament can do to help support this will be really warmly welcomed. It is an important development, not just for them but for the whole region.

So I've continued to ask Foreign Ministers to offer their support through their bilateral contacts and I'm extremely pleased by the way that they have done so. And as I've said, I hope the European Council tomorrow will be clear in its decisions. Mr President I hope that gives you a good sense of the day we spent at the Foreign Affairs Council. Thank you.