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Ministers of Foreign Affairs of France, Germany and Poland

Ministers of Defence of France, Germany and Poland

Dear Ministers,

I would like to thank you for your very comprehensive letter on various important issues regarding the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union. I share your view that we need to find new momentum in order fully to meet the needs of our Member States. I think the proposals made in your letter are interesting and will contribute to building on the Conclusions of the European Council of December 2008, and of the conclusions adopted by the Council in December 2010.

Like you, I attach great importance to EU-NATO relations. Together with the NATO Secretary General I have spared no effort to improve this essential relationship. My approach has always been political as well as concrete and pragmatic. I share your views that we need to focus on achieving operational goals, fully preserving and where possible further developing our cooperation in operations and key military capability areas. We have recently done so in the field of Medical Support and Counter Improvised Explosive Devices (CIED) and I hope we will be able to expand this approach to Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN).

I have made concrete proposals and there are mechanisms in place at all levels that allow us to work with NATO, despite the well known political difficulties. We need to continue along this path, while pursuing the ambition to develop a true organisation-to-organisation relationship. To achieve results I will need your support as members of both the EU and NATO.

I also fully share your positive outlook on the development of stronger relations between the EU and the US in the field of CSDP. This is proven by our concrete experience in several theatres both with military and civilian EU missions. I am convinced that, as shown by our excellent cooperation with the US and NATO on fighting piracy along the coast of Somalia, stronger CSDP cooperation with the US does not weaken NATO.

You also raise permanent civil military planning and conduct capabilities, as well as the development of Battlegroups. I share your assessment that we need to improve our functioning in the field of crisis management. That is one of the reasons why I did not want to take a hasty decision on the final set up of crisis management structures. This is a serious issue, and there is room for improvement. The three lines of activities you propose to pursue at the strategic, the operational and the tactical level are important ones. I have asked the top management of the EEAS to look at the issue of our organisation at the strategic level. On the issue of military conduct capability, no one is contesting the need for such a structure. The question is whether the current arrangements are satisfactory or should be changed. A cost efficiency analysis should be conducted to help inform, along with other considerations, our discussions on this subject.

I fully support a pragmatic approach to further adapt and increase the capabilities of the EU Battlegroups. Work is ongoing on the possibility of using our Battlegroups in Humanitarian Assistance. In this regard I would like to welcome your intention to increase the preparedness and responsiveness of the Battlegroup on stand-by in 2013. This will be a significant element for a possible use of this Battlegroup during its stand-by period, should Members take a collective decision on this.

Finally regarding the important issue of European Capabilities, and the development of Battlegroups, I agree that the Treaty of Lisbon's provisions on the Permanent Structured Cooperation potentially provides a useful tool to enhance progress in military capabilities, once Member States reach common ground on implementation criteria and modalities allowing appropriate flexibility and efficiency. We need to continue to exchange views on how and when it will come into being and to foster our efforts to achieve concrete and pragmatic progress in capability development.

I will support all initiatives launched at EU and Member States level which could help generate the capabilities we are still lacking in CSDP operations. I attach particular importance, especially under current financial constraints, to the ongoing work on possibilities to pool and share capabilities and also to efforts to create civil-military synergies in capability development. As the Head of the European Defence Agency, I will encourage the EDA to contribute to this.

A debate is needed on the Defence Technological and Industrial Base (DTIB), which is important for our Common Security and Defence Policy, both from a strategic and economic point of view.

I intend to ask my services to continue their work around the three lines of activity you have identified. We may have a discussion on the state of play of this work in our next meetings, in particular the Informal Defence Ministerial meeting in February and the Council meeting with Ministers of Defence in May.

Yours sincerely



Catherine Ashton