**Summary**

The working session on EU Operational Engagements focused mainly on initial lessons from the crisis in Afghanistan for the EU’s security and defence engagements. MS broadly supported the HRVP call to strengthen capabilities and the will to act, step up the integrated approach and to stay engaged with Afghanistan. The different concrete proposals will be picked up and further developed also in the context of the work on the Strategic Compass. On the Sahel, Libya, Western Balkans and Mozambique, MS stressed their continued and increasing commitment to the different engagements. With regard to the situation at the Belarusian border, a number of MS called for stronger EU solidarity and action. In response to the LT AOB on increasing military assistance to Ukraine, the HRVP noted that the PSC would discuss possible options on the basis of an EEAS assessment by the end of September.

The working session on the Strategic Compass Resilience Basket did not take place due to time limitations. It will be picked up in a Minister-level workshop ahead of the circulation of the first draft of the Compass in early November.

The working lunch with NATO (DSG Geoana) and UN (USG Lacroix) focused on common geostrategic challenges and opportunities for further cooperation. NATO stressed in particular the need to closely coordinate on Afghanistan, as well as on the ongoing strategic reflection processes in both organisations, also welcoming a third Joint EU–NATO Declaration by the end of the year. UN drew initial lessons from Afghanistan (primacy of politics; long term, global and multidimensional approaches; regular political level consultations). During the ensuing discussion, MS stressed the need for coordination on Afghanistan, supported a new joint declaration, called for EU actions on the hybrid attacks from Belarus and called for an administrative arrangement between Operation Irini and Sea Guardian.

**Detail**

Working Session I: EU Operational Engagements

The discussion on EU operational engagements touched upon Afghanistan, Sahel, Libya, Western Balkans, Belarus and, under AOB, Ukraine. In his introductory remarks, the HRVP recalled the extraordinary situation in Afghanistan and reported on the successful extraction by Member States of 17500 people (4100 EU nationals plus 13400 Afghan nationals). At the same time, he acknowledged the major blow the crisis has been to the West. In terms of early lessons he highlighted the need to 1) strengthen not only EU capacities, but also the will to act (raising EU readiness through exercises; establishing an initial entry force of 5000 soldiers; strengthening military command and control capabilities; addressing capability shortfalls); 2) step up the integrated approach combining military, civilian, development and diplomatic efforts; 3) stay engaged in shaping the future of Afghanistan together with partners and Allies. With regard to the Sahel, the HRVP underlined the continued EU commitment to the region, in particular through the strengthened CSDP engagement. On Libya, he emphasised the EU commitment on the political processes and the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, in particular through CSDP engagements. Here he underlined the link between the need to resume training activities with the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy and the provision of equipment. With regard to BiH, the HRVP highlighted the continued importance of Operation Althea for security and the issue of the renewal of the UNSC mandate and Russia’s negative reaction to the nomination of a new High Representative. On Mozambique, the HRVP noted the improving security situation and underlined the EU willingness to engage in coordination with regional partners. With the EUTM decision adopted and the EPF Assistance Measure on track, he called upon MS for a successful force generation for the mission.

Commissioner Breton underlined the need to do a proper evaluation on the evacuations in Afghanistan, noting that despite the difficulties on the ground, the cooperation amongst EU MS was a success. The developments in Afghanistan had again shown the need for autonomy, solidarity and proper capabilities for the EU. An ambitious implementation of the European Defence Fund will be crucial in this regard and Defence Ministers will play a key role in defining the level of ambition. The Strategic Compass will have to reflect this ambitious approach.

Chairman EUMC Graziano stressed that the crisis in Afghanistan showed that the EU needs to speed up its decision-making procedures, consider majority voting or constructive abstentions, review the current CSDP common costs set-up, conduct live exercises, establish an initial entry force and ensure necessary strategic enablers and MPCC structures. In this light, the EU should also reassess the effectiveness of its CSDP engagement in Africa and move from training towards a more assertive and conditions-based stance.

MS engaged in a near full tour de table (SI, DE, DK, PT, LV, ES, BE, NL, SE, FR, AT, IE, EE, CZ, IT, EL, PL, RO, FI, HR, HU, BG, LU, MT, SK).

On Afghanistan, MS (SI, DE, DK, PT, ES, BE, NL, SE, FR, AT, IE, EE, CZ, IT, EL, PL, RO, FI, HR, HU, BG, LU, SK) highlighted the considerable solidarity during the evacuations in the past weeks and underlined the need to draw honest lessons for current and future missions and operations, also in the context of the Strategic Compass, with the aim of a stronger, faster, more assertive and reliable EU. This comprises in particular lessons on our strategic interests and ambitions as well as the exposed capability-related vulnerabilities. In this regard, they referred to autonomous evacuations, but also on a possible initial entry force, stronger EU command and control structures, the current intelligence structures, an increased role for the EU institutions, EU decision-making processes, required investments, possible majority voting or coalitions of the willing, Article 44 TEU, cooperation with partners and regional responsibilities. Some MS (LU, SK) stressed in this regard that the focus should be on improving existing mechanisms instead of creating new ones. Also, this should not lead to a divide between the EU and NATO or the US (DE, IE, PL, RO). The overall aim must be to avoid a repetition of what was perceived as a defeat (SI). At the same time, a safe haven for terrorists in Afghanistan should be prevented, which could require direct engagement with the Taliban (ES, NL, IT, FI). European efforts on the extradition of local staff should continue (DE, LV, ES, BE, NL, IE, IT). SK stressed its surprise that Defence Ministers had not been involved in the discussions on evacuation efforts and would have welcomed an extraordinary FAC Defence mid-August. DE announced that it would shortly present a number of concrete proposals on a strong reply to the crisis in Afghanistan (NL supporting).

With regard to the Sahel, MS (PT, BE, SE, FR, EE, IT, EL, RO, FI, HR, HU, BG, LU) expressed concern on the still volatile security situation that required continued and intensified EU commitment among the full spectrum using the integrated approach, including through the EPF. CZ stressed the need to step-up public communications on the EU’s engagement, also vis-à-vis increased Russian information campaigns. FI & HU declared their readiness to contribute to EUTM Mali.

On Libya, MS (FR) called to communicate on refusals for inspections of vessels by Operation Irini. Any equipment provided to the Coast Guard and Navy should not be trained upon by third countries (FR). EU training efforts should therefore be increased (IT, HR). Efforts should continue to reach an agreement between Operation Irini and NATO Sea Guardian (EL). RO declared its readiness to increase its contribution to Operation Irini.

On Mozambique, MS (PT, EE, EL, RO, FI) underlined the fast EU responsiveness with the agreed EUTM, but also the need to quickly follow up with implementing and delivering on the EPF assistance measure. EE, EL, FI & LU declared their willingness to contribute to the EUTM.

With regard to Western Balkans, MS (SI, FR, AT, CZ, PL, RO, HR, HU, BG, SK) highlighted the continued strategic importance of the region for Europe that requires a continued solid presence, including by EUFOR Althea, but also through EPF assistance, also in view of the growing engagement of our strategic competitors in the region.

With regard to the situation at the Belarusian border, MS (LV, SE, PL, EE, FI, BG) referred to ongoing hybrid attacks on the Eastern EU borders in response to the imposed EU sanctions and called for more EU solidarity and action, including through more sanctions across the board. The Russian-led ZAPAD exercise should be considered in the same context.

On the Gulf of Guinea, DK announced that it would send a Frigate in November for 5 months.

Under any other business, LT (supported by EE, CZ, RO, BG, SI, SK, PL, LV, SE) re-emphasised the request by six MS to increase the EU support to Ukraine, including through an EUTM-like training mission focusing on military education and called upon the EEAS to present options for an EU engagement in Ukraine. PL asked for a Council Decision on this by the end of the year. While supporting the intention of increased support to Ukraine, DE, FR & NL stressed some caution and saw the need for further discussions and assessments on how to best assist Ukraine, also in view of other multilateral efforts, in particular in the context of NATO.

In his concluding remarks, the HRVP welcomed this very constructive discussion on the range of operational engagements and stressed that with regard to Afghanistan this was only the start of the lessons process. He welcomed MS call for a stronger, faster, more assertive and reliable EU and the support by a number of MS to some of the concrete ideas in this regard that will also be picked up again in the discussions on the Strategic Compass. He took note of the request on Ukraine and informed that the EEAS will present options for engagement to PSC by the end of September (ahead of the 12 Oct EU-Ukraine Summit), taking into consideration the whole range of tools available as well as the political implications. In this regard, he also reminded that Ukraine was already receiving the highest EU financial per capita support compared to other recipients.

Working Session II: Strategic Compass, Resilience Basket

The discussion on the Strategic Compass Resilience basket did not take place due to time limitations. In coordination with the SI Presidency, the HRVP informed that the intention was to organise in due time a minister-level workshop on the Compass that could address elements of the resilience basket as well as other issues of particular interest to EU MS, and ahead of the circulation of the first draft of the Compass in November.

Working Lunch: Strategic Discussion with NATO and UN

The working lunch (for Heads of Delegation only) with the participation of NATO Deputy Secretary General (DSG) Geoana and UN Under Secretary General (USG) Lacroix focused on common geostrategic challenges and opportunities for further cooperation. Following the recent developments in Afghanistan, the **HRVP** stressed the need for an ever closer cooperation and coordination between the three organizations. Reinforcing multilateralism and nurturing democratic values is a priority and will be part of the partnerships basket of the Strategic Compass. We need to draw lessons and assess the costs for Europe in terms of security, including terrorism, narco-trafficking and irregular migration, and use this impetus to further strengthen our cooperation, including through defining new priorities for EU-UN cooperation in crisis management and peace operations for 2022-2024, as well as through a new Joint EU-NATO Declaration to be prepared by the end of the year.

**NATO DSG Geoana** called for putting the Afghanistan developments into perspective. The international community should not forget the service and sacrifice of its personnel and their Afghan counterparts, as well as the Afghans being left behind. We have to use our leverage to make the Taliban honour their promises with regards to safe passage, and Afghanistan not becoming a safe haven for terrorists. It is imperative that we find solutions for Afghans already in transit thorough vetting, processing and distributing them to receiving destinations. The international community must upgrade its counter-terrorism instruments, keep a unified approach and closely coordinate among the institutions. NATO has engaged in a two-track lessons-learned process, a standard military one, as well as an honest, humble and lucid political one. Ministers of Defence will discuss this in October, followed by Ministers of Foreign affairs at their meeting in Riga. Staying true to our shared values, preserving the transatlantic bond and ensuring the right division of labour between the EU and NATO will be key. Regarding the strategic reflection processes, we have to ensure synergies, while respecting the differences. The DSG also supported the 3rd joint declaration to be adopted on the margins of a European Council meeting by the end of the year. Areas where cooperation could be strengthened are resilience, EDTs, space, military mobility and climate and defence. NATO is also engaged in partnerships in Africa (Ghana is interested in becoming the first sub-Saharan NATO partner). Belarus is a security concern by itself (hybrid activities through weaponisation of migration on the Baltic/Polish borders), bringing Russia effectively closer to NATO’s borders. NATO is also carefully analysing the ongoing Russian-Chinese exercise. Any strengthening of EU defence capabilities is strongly welcomed by NATO, recalling that the EU is a unique and indispensable partner for NATO.

**UN USG Lacroix** emphasized that the UN is dealing with the emergency in Afghanistan, committed to staying on the ground and delivering humanitarian aid (if security conditions allow) with about 100 international staff remaining and hundreds of local staff. He recalled underfunding of its efforts, with only 39% met (600-700 millions $ missing from the requirements), and stressed the importance of converging political messaging by the international community. UN presence will likely be continued in the short term on the basis of an unchanged mandate, while in the long term some adaptations might be necessary. Several lessons are to be drawn from the Afghanistan experience: 1) the importance of establishing the primacy of politics and unified messaging; 2) the requirement to sustain long term approach and engagement; 3) the need for a global and multi-dimensional approach with attention being paid to the diverse drivers of conflict (pandemic, climate change); 4) the need for a coordinated approach within the UN system and beyond; and 5) the importance of regular political level consultations. On Mali/Sahel, as the developments are not encouraging, we need to deliver united and coordinated messages on the importance of political transition and the revitalisation of the political effort, continue our support to G5 Sahel (this work is close to nation building). He also encouraged Ministers to participate in the high-level conference in Republic of Korea in December.

**Commissioner Breton** stressed the need to assess the consequences of the Afghanistan withdrawal for Europe (security, migration etc.). Europe must become a stronger security actor both for itself and globally, develop its different defence initiatives, which will strengthen the European pillar of NATO, and make the EU a better and more credible ally. He recalled the 74 actions of the joint EU-NATO cooperation and pleaded for further intensification of cooperation in the areas of resilience, EDTs, climate change, space and cyber. Any EU technology development must remain free of any third party restrictions, and he expressed hope for a transparent approach from partners. Finally, he pleaded for more political dialogue between EU and NATO.

On Afghanistan, **Member States** called for more coordination among the three institutions and asked for clear takeaways and lessons learned from this crisis (**SI, RO, FI, FR, DK, SE, HR, NL, IE, EL**). The EU should take more responsibility in contributing to its own and to global security, which should be the focus of the Strategic Compass (**FR, IE**). **IE** called for more strategic autonomy of the EU. Furthermore, we should make the tools at our disposal more efficient and usable (EU Battlegroups) (**SI**), increase political consultations (**FR, NL, DK, CY**), and intensify cooperation in theatres where we work together (**FR**). Furthermore, we should demonstrate unity of the international community in messaging towards the Taliban (**FR, HR, IE**). According to **HR**, we need to use the recognition of the Taliban regime as leverage. It will be paramount to prevent another unregulated migration wave towards Europe. **DK** lamented that the responsibility for the evacuation lied mainly with the Member States, and **SE** that US did not consult Allies on its decision. **IE** wondered why the interventions by the international organizations are unsuccessful despite the resources invested, while claiming that we need real nation building and not just military interventions. **SE** was persuaded that we need to be ready for long-term engagements.

On EU-NATO cooperation/transatlantic cooperation, **FI, PL** and **FR** supported the new declaration, while **FR** stressed the need to avoid duplication and competition (particularly in the areas such as EDTs and resilience, where EU already has capacities that NATO can rely on). According to **PL**, the new joint declaration needs to focus on a set of concrete improvements. **CY** reiterated that we need to discuss on regional security environments, while TR threats must feature in the threat analysis. **IE** mentioned that the transatlantic alliance is more important than ever, also for the EU. **PL** recalled the single set of forces and the need to allow NATO Allies to cooperate in PESCO, as well as finalize the EDA-US DoD administrative arrangement. The transatlantic community must address together the challenges from Russia and China.

On Belarus and the hybrid attacks, **PL**, supported by **LT, EE** and **LV**, recalled the ongoing hybrid attack against PL and the Baltic states and asked for an HRVP declaration on behalf of the EU, confirming solidarity and protection of borders. The situation might further escalate and provocation will continue also in relation to the ZAPAD exercise, expecting it to be much larger than announced. EU and NATO need to engage in strategic communication towards: 1) Belarus: the EU borders are protected; 2) EU public: border protection is a shared responsibility, and 3) originating and transit countries: there is no open path to the EU. In clear distinction with NATO that provides hard security, **LV** asked what the EU provides to an EU Member State under hybrid attack. As the EU border with Belarus is underdeveloped and unprotected by physical infrastructure, the public cannot understand why the EU cannot fund the creation of solid border infrastructure (such as fences). The UN is not of much help either, claiming that they cannot work against the wishes of the authorities in Minsk. According to **SE**, RU is a strategic challenge and we have to face all threats together. **EL** reiterated that EU has to project political will to defend its borders (with Belarus and TR) and its readiness to defend its vital interests, which will deter third parties from weaponising migration.

On Libya, **FR** also mentioned the need to implement the UN arms embargo and push for the withdrawal of foreign mercenaries. It also called for a swift progress among NATO allies on the conclusion of the administrative arrangement between Operation Irini and Sea Guardian.

In his concluding remarks, the **HRVP** recalled that on Belarus, a statement was issued already on August 1 and leverage was also exercised towards Iraqi authorities as requested. On the Afghanistan migration discussion, he raised a major internal contradiction: we demand safe passage but reject the idea of migration to Europe. Another contradiction is the (US) rejection of the idea of nation building, while, in fact, counter-terrorism and nation building cannot be separated. We also have to assess the impact to the public opinion that can draw negative conclusions and be hesitant to support international engagements in the future.