

Extract from Hansard House of Commons - 19 March 2012

EU Foreign Ministers (Informal Meeting)

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr William Hague): I attended an informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (Gymnich), which was held on 9-10 March in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The informal format of the Gymnich allows EU Ministers to engage in a free and in-depth discussion. Discussions are held in private, and Ministers do not agree any formal written conclusions, in contrast to arrangements in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). The next FAC will be held on 23 March.

The Gymnich was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland. Her remarks following the meeting can be found at:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128885.pdf

The meeting was structured around three themes: EU foreign policy in the current economic context; human rights; and the nature of EU influence, sanctions and engagement.....

The nature of EU influence, sanctions and engagement

Ministers debated the utility of sanctions as a lever of foreign policy. I and other Ministers argued that well-targeted sanctions could influence regime capability and behaviour. Recent examples include the effect of sanctions on the regime in Burma and formerly in Libya. Ministers took the view that EU sanctions should target regime behaviour, not innocent civilians; should be targeted and reversible; and should not be used in isolation from other measures. Ministers further noted that they were more effective when co-ordinated with the UN and other key actors; and when their purpose was better communicated.

Ministers agreed that sanctions were just one element of the EU toolkit. Positive incentives—market access; enlargement; development spend—could also influence third countries. A sophisticated approach combining positive and negative levers was needed, depending on circumstance.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Europe and I will continue to update Parliament on Foreign and General Affairs Councils as and when future meetings are held.