Today, what started as the first ever military operation of the European Union ends. The blue and yellow EU flag will be lowered at the headquarters for Operation Concordia in Skopje, capital of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and more than 400 members of the mission return to their home countries.

This is a good day, a day of achievement, for the authorities in Skopje as well as for the European Union.

For the authorities in Skopje it is a good day, because it shows that the responsible policies pursued by the Government have allowed a gradual stabilisation and normalisation of the situation in the country. Major progress has been made in the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the peace agreement that put an end to the violent conflict in 2001. Tensions have decreased. Mistrust between the main ethnic communities, Slav Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, has been reduced. Law and order is gradually returning. While a number of important challenges remain to be tackled, a country that two years ago was at the brink of another bloody Balkan civil war is now in a position to wish goodbye to the international military presence. A milestone is passed on the path leading away from conflict and towards integration with, and eventually into, the European Union.

For the European Union it is a good day, because what started as the first ever EU-led military operation is successfully concluded. As part of a comprehensive international peace implementation effort led by the EU and the United States, Operation Concordia has, as did previous Nato-led missions, provided a stabilising presence in areas of tension. While the mission was small, the Union has showed that, like in Congo over the summer, it is able to deploy a capable military force. It has also proven that, like few other international actors, it can bring together different instruments and capabilities: political leadership, military force, and economic support. Reflecting the improved security situation, the Union will from this day support the authorities in Skopje with a police mission, EUPOL/Proxima, instead of a military one.

It is also a good day for our international partners: the United States, Nato and the OSCE. Together, we have worked in support of peace and stability in Macedonia. The agreement on EU-NATO permanent arrangements in December last year allowed the use of some Nato assets and capabilities for Operation Concordia. This close co-operation reflects our common determination to tackle the challenges in the Balkans and elsewhere.

Finally, for the EU, this day is a sign that a lot has been achieved over a short period of time. We began to build a Common European Foreign and Security Policy in 1992. Few then believed that only a decade later we would send out men in arms under the EU’s flag. However, much more remains do be done if the EU is to be ready to meet old and new challenges in a more complex world. The first European Security Strategy approved by EU Heads of State and Government this weekend says that if we are to make a contribution that matches our potential, we need to be more active, more coherent and more capable. A successful military operation, and what I expect will be a successful police mission, constitute a significant step in this direction: towards a Europe that is able to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world.