

Keynote address of the High Representative and Vice-president at Leiden University, the Netherlands

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Good evening. It is a pleasure to be here at Leiden University's The Hague Campus. A place that brings together the best of two worlds: with centuries of academic tradition – founded in 1575, Leiden is one of Europe's leading universities. This campus here in The Hague – the seat of so many international organisations – also demonstrates a true openness to the world. I can't see a better place to reflect about Europe's global role, history and future.

We meet here in challenging times. Today our world is much more connected than just a decade ago. In these days, at the Global Conference on Cyberspace, we work on the many opportunities, but also the great risks this brings.

Our world today is also much more conflictual and complex than we used to imagine. What is so dangerous is not just the sheer number of simultaneous crises and that alone would be more than enough to worry. Many of these conflicts undermine the very foundations of the cooperative global order we aim at.

The illusion about the "end of history" is long gone. Over the last decade, many have bet on a state of perennial conflict. A global disorder in which international laws and human rights are empty words. In which extremists prosper and impose terror on entire populations.

Today, instability has once again reached our doorstep. Someone still believes we could simply lock ourselves into our "fortress Europe". Well, let me say this is an illusion. The kind of world we live in would never allowed us to do so. We live in an interconnected world.

Our fundamental interests and values are at stake. The values for which past generations have fought so tirelessly, the values upon which our European Union was built: peace, democracy and human rights.

Over the past decades we have made amazing progress in Europe to anchor these values deep in our societies. It looks natural now, but if we look back we see war and the worst atrocities where now there is peace and cooperation: the EU. We should never forget the responsibility that this gives us.

And we have enlarged the circle of those who benefit from them. The European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this. The Nobel Peace Prize to the EU was not just for the past, for what we achieved. It is also for what we can still do, for and with our people, for and with our Region, for and with the rest of the world.

There is no doubt that, as the nature of challenges evolves, so must our means to address them. But our fundamental beliefs and aspirations, our commitment to work towards a more peaceful world are and will stay the same – now more than ever. This requires both nerve and staying power. And it requires unity of purpose.

What we need is not new principles, but new ways to project them.

Let me focus on three areas where only a renewed commitment to our values can promote our interests, protect our security and shape the world we would like to live in – today and for the future.

First, in our neighbourhood, where violent conflicts go hand in hand with a battle of ideas. Second, in how we shape our partnerships around the world. And third, in how we plan for the future, how we make the best use of our tools. Nowhere is the urgency to protect our fundamental interests and values clearer than in the crises at our Eastern and Southern borders. We see fundamental principles flouted as borders and national sovereignty are violated. What makes these conflicts so dangerous is that they combine beliefs we thought belonged to a bygone era – the law of the stronger and disregard for individual dignity – with the trappings of the modern age.

So the crises we face to our East and to our South are much more than violent confrontations – they are also a battle for hearts and minds.

Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty is not just a regional crisis. It is a matter of universal concern. The UN Security Council Resolution on Ukraine is testament to this and the tragic loss of lives in the downing of flight MH17, that has touched so many in this country in such a dramatic way, reminded to the whole of us that this conflict goes to the heart of our own security.

Our priority is – and has always been – for the violence to stop. All our efforts are focused on the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. We have engaged in dialogue on all levels, in all formats. At the same time, we have adopted tough sanctions.

But sanctions are not an end in themselves. That is why EU leaders have firmly linked restrictive measures to progress on the implementation of the Minsk agreements – above all respecting the ceasefire and removing all heavy weapons from the region.

A destabilised and isolated Russia is in no one's interest. Russia is central, not just to a stable and prosperous Eastern neighbourhood, but also to some of the most pressing issues we face: I think of the Middle East Peace Process and, of course, I think of completing the process towards a comprehensive agreement with Iran on the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme.

Russia and its people have as much to gain as we do from a world where international law is respected, where people are free to choose their own destinies.

A lasting solution to the crisis also depends on Ukraine becoming a functional state that honours the aspirations of its people.^[1] That is why the EU works closely with Ukraine on its reform agenda. We give macro-financial assistance to stabilise the country's finances; we deployed an EU Advisory Mission to assist with security sector reform; and we facilitate negotiations between Russia and Ukraine to ensure secure gas supplies.

And we work with the Osce and with the rest of the international community to make sure that the crisis comes to an end, a solution.

Strengthening state structures and giving democracy a space to prosper – this is also central to working with our neighbours to the South.

Take Libya: the prospect of a failed state at our southern borders is a serious risk to our continent's security. Actually, difficult to refer to a failed State as we can hardly see a 'State'. Extremists have filled the gap left by the lack of a functioning state. They spread fear and hatred along with terrible violence. Human traffickers exploit the misery of migrants, gambling with innocent lives for their personal gain. What is more, the conflict risks destabilising the entire region, from Maghreb to Sahel, to sub-Saharan Africa.

The European Union welcomes the resumption of the national reconciliation talks, mediated by the UN representative Bernardino Leon. We are doing all we can any single day to facilitate the dialogue and will support a national unity government as soon as it is formed. We call on all regional actors to do the same. This is, believe me, is the main point we have been working on days and nights in the last weeks.

Those who keep spreading violence to undermine the talks will have to ask themselves, sincerely: what is the alternative to an inclusive process that unites Libyans against Daesh?. Ultimately, a lasting solution lies in the hands of the Libyan people. In their willingness to save their country, their cities, their people. Not tomorrow but now.

As our attention is attracted by new flares of conflict, we should not get used to what has happened in Syria for over four years. The situation today is more desperate than ever. Too many lives have been lost, centuries of culture, the treasures of our common civilization, our joint heritage – destroyed.

A generation of displaced children is growing up in refugee camps without access to proper food and healthcare, let alone education. What happened in Yarmouk is one more terrible episode in a humanitarian catastrophe.

Faced with so much misery, the EU has focused on the humanitarian dimension of this crisis. We have mobilised more than 3 billion euros to assist Syrians at home, as well as refugees and their host communities in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, who deserve praise for their solidarity with the victims.

But we also need to restart the process towards a political transition and national reconciliation. Again, this process can only be Syrian-led. But we also expect regional powers to stop fostering conflict and to support a mediation among the parties. Peace in Syria will also depend on cooperation among regional stakeholders – including Iran.

We will have to work with all our partners in the Region to build a new regional framework to put and end to crisis and prevent terrorist groups to gain ground.

Look at Yemen. Over there, Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula is trying to fill the vacuum that emerged in a state of increasing lawlessness. We now need to focus all efforts on international mediation. Unilateral solutions cannot work. All these crises point in the same direction: regional powers need to agree on a new order for the Middle East, a peaceful and cooperative one. An order where issues are dealt with at the negotiating table, not via proxy wars.

This brings us back to the role of Iran. The framework we agreed on in Switzerland is in itself an important leap towards a comprehensive agreement on Iran's nuclear programme, that would be hugely beneficial in terms of non proliferation, so in terms of security for the Region and the world. But it could also be a first step towards a more positive role for Teheran on the international scene, and possibly to facilitate dialogue in countries destabilised by a decade-long struggle for regional supremacy.

And we could have the chance to overcome the false narrative of 'religious clashes' that mask power fights in reality. In the region, as much as right here at home, security is not the only issue at stake when it comes to countering violent extremism. The terrorists seek to revive the stale narrative of a clash of civilisations, while Muslims are the first victims of "jihadism" all over the world. The clash runs within civilisations, within Islam itself that is a religion of peace. The daily greeting 'Salamaleikum' says it all: 'May peace be with you'. As the King of Jordan underlined at the European Parliament. Europe stands on the same side as the overwhelming majority of the Muslim world and of the Arab countries.

At home as well as abroad, the fight against Da'esh is also about showing that Europe is a land of freedom and opportunities for all Christians, Muslims, Jews and non-believers alike. It is about reaffirming the true nature of the Middle East, with diversity as an integral part of its DNA. It is another battle for hearts and minds.

In this battle, reviving the Middle East Peace Process is vital. Peace in the "Holy Places" could lay out the most resounding message against the misuse of religious symbols, for the region and the whole world.

Europe's deep political and economic partnership with Israel and our role as the foremost donor to the Palestinian Authority and UNWRA give us a key position in reinvigorating the peace talks. And it gives us a special responsibility. We need to build a new international consensus to resolve this conflict: the European Union, the United States, Russia and the UN are central pillars of this effort. Our Arab partners in the region also play a key role in supporting a successful peace process: the Arab Peace Initiative provides a vision for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Above all, both parties need to rebuild trust and refrain from actions that undermine it. Before it is too late for two States to live side by side in peace and security. Before it is too late for entire generations to get lost in hate and despair. In Israel as in Palestine.

The arc of instability is all around us. We live in the most turbulent area of the world (G7). The situation at our borders demonstrates the added value of a strong and united EU foreign policy. But the sheer scale and complexity of the crises we face tell us something more: we cannot hope to be successful without a global network of partners that share our interests and values.

To effectively do so, we need to convince them that working with Europe is not to perpetuate an anachronistic global order that seeks to exclude them from a seat at the table. We need partnerships on an equal footing. This means truly engaging with the concerns that new powers bring to the table, but also a full commitment by all to work towards common solutions.

A new world order will not emerge as a zero sum game, where increased influence for some necessarily means decreased influence for others. Influence will be shared, and so will responsibilities.

Today the vast majority of challenges we face are common challenges. From security to climate, from poverty to energy. This makes cooperation even more crucial. So in addition to strong bilateral partnerships, we are strengthening our cooperation with regional partners such as ASEAN, the CELAC countries, the League of Arab States and the African Union.

Our cooperation with the United States forms the oldest, deepest and strongest of our partnerships. And yet, we cannot afford to neglect this bond. We need to build on our deep historical ties and work towards a common future. And this is something we should do more: look at the future. Not only the immediate one. Look at 10, 20 years from now. To protect our values and enshrine them in any future order, we need to think strategically – more than we ever did, starting with our Region.

The fact that the Arab Awakening was not a linear path to freedom and democracy in the region should not lead us to conclude that we should give up. Some processes are slow, difficult, but somehow irreversible. We have to look at the bigger picture and long term. There is no stability without democracy. And there is no security without human rights. So we need to work closely with countries such as Tunisia and Morocco, who are committed to the path of reform. We need to support those, such as Lebanon and Jordan, who face incredible external and internal pressures. Above all we need to invest in the younger generations and give them a stake in our shared future: through education and employment, through freedoms and rights. We need to make sure they have a place in society, in the EU as well as in the southern shore of the Mediterranean. This would be the best way of preventing terrorism.

Beyond our neighbourhood, we need to take a fresh look at how we approach our external action. More than a decade after Javier Solana's European Security Strategy, the world has changed. And we have changed as well. The European Union now has the capacity to be a truly global player. Our European External Action Service was created precisely to enable us to address some of the challenges the Solana Strategy lays out so lucidly.

The European Union has a real added value in facing the risks of a rapidly changing world. We are able to draw on a wide range of policies for our external action: from the three d's (diplomacy, development and defence), to energy and trade, migration and security. In a world where the lines between internal and external threats are increasingly blurred, this is an important unique asset.

And what is important and unique is also or unity, the size and weight of an European Union. Alone, we are almost irrelevant in today's world. Together we are a superpower.

We now need to connect the dots and think for the long term. If we want lasting solutions, we need to stay engaged even after the eyes of international media turn away from any given crisis spot. We need to combine fast action with patient negotiations; we need to sanction those that threaten the global order and create incentives for working together towards peace. We need hard and soft power. We need conflict prevention and post crises management.

Amid the current global chaos, a new external strategy will give us a sense of direction, an ability to make choices and to prioritise. It will also give us a true sense of European ownership: a common vision.

That is why I want to include Member States in this process heading to a new European Foreign Policy, defense and security strategy. Not only governments, but also national parliaments, the academia, think tanks and NGOs – the foreign policy community at large. If it has to be our own, common direction, we need to work at it together and share it from the very beginning.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear students,

The motto of your university is Praesidium Libertatis. When I was in University, I was convinced that Europe was this Praesidium Libertatis. The European Union has brought us the freedom of opportunities: the freedom to move, to trade, to work – and of course to study. But above all it has brought us freedom from war in our continent. It has not brought us freedom from fear.

Looking at the world around us, where conflict is such a pervasive feature, we still have to fight against our own fears. You might call my continued belief in the European project naïve. But the fact that the spectre of war has returned to Europe's neighbourhood is exactly the reason why we know we need to be together. Because only together we can make sure that the freedom of opportunities that we have built in the last decades can be there also for the future generations and for the present generations all around our borders.

Confronted by turmoil and uncertainty, we cannot afford to turn inwards. Now more than ever we need to face our fears and fight the dangers that threaten to undermine our achievements. To promote what we have, to promote opportunities for those that don't have them today and to find again hope in a better future, for us and those around us.

So now more than ever we need to work together to ensure that Europe is not a fortress, or a crumbling palace of bygone glories – but truly a 'Praesidium Libertatis' for all .

Thank you.