

Lunch Address

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Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and
Gentlemen;

I.

This is my final Asia-Pacific Roundtable. After four intense, truly memorable years in Malaysia, I will move to the Western Balkans in September. As I stand here today, I think about my time here in Malaysia, but also

about the past 30 years since I started my diplomatic career in 1994. And, I am truly worried about what lies ahead.

I see more conflicts, denial of multilateralism and the UN norms, and less cooperation. Moreover, in all spheres, there is a new sense of contestation.

Territorial contestation, as is the case in the South China Sea.

Issue-specific contestation, for example with regard to climate justice.

Normative contestation, including highly targeted efforts of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. The current European elections are unfortunately a case in point.

I see a world much more fragmented. A world where universally agreed rules such as the UN Charter or International Humanitarian Law are increasingly not being adhered. In parallel, I see much more fragmented societies, the rise of “far right” understanding of nationalism, which has a direct impact on foreign policy making.

I see a more multipolar world, but strikingly with multilateralism in decline.

I see how dependencies easily become weapons.

And, like everyone in this room, I see two raging wars with uncertain endgame. I see a UNSC member violating any sense of norm that it is supposed to protect and adhere. I see civilians being massacred daily, in Gaza or in Ukraine, in Myanmar or in less captivating the public opinion's eyesight places.

The post-1945 multilateral world order with the US as its hegemon is losing ground. China is rising to super-power status. What Beijing has done in the last 30 years is unique in the history of humankind. China's share of the world's GDP, at PPP, has gone from 6 percent to almost 20 percent, while we, Europeans, went from 21 percent to 14 percent and the United States from 20 percent to 15 percent. This is a dramatic change of the economic landscape.

Middle powers are emerging. They are becoming important actors. Whether they are BRICS or not BRICS, or so-called Global South, they have few common features, except the desire for getting more status and a stronger voice in the world, as well as greater benefits for their own development. To achieve this, they are maximising their autonomy, hedging one side or the other depending on the moment and the issue.

The motto of this roundtable is "Crisis in an interregnum". We all know from history that an

interregnum can last quite long. It creates uncertainty, raising the question of leadership. How long will the current interregnum last then? And how will it end?

None of these questions can be answered without taking into account the geopolitical and geo-economic realities of the Indo-Pacific. Because, the future of the international order is largely being shaped here.

The APR is a great forum to discuss this. I congratulate ISIS for putting together a truly inspiring agenda with a stellar speaker line-up.

II.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

How has the EU positioned itself in this interregnum, in what HRVP Borrell calls “Europe between two wars”?

We, Europeans, wanted to create in our neighbourhood a ring of friends. What we have today is a ring of fire from the Sahel to the Middle East, the Caucasus and the battlefields of Ukraine.

And now, there are two wars.

You know which ones I am referring to. However, of course there is a lot more. In 2022, 56 countries suffered

some form of armed conflict. Many of them not making headlines.

When I became a diplomat in 1994, there were also terrible wars, for example in the Western Balkans, where I will be heading in a few months' time, or the genocide in Rwanda.

However, the overall outlook was optimistic. Maybe sometimes too optimistic, for example when Francis Fukuyama claimed that the end of the Cold War marked "the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

In Europe, we were reorganising the EU as our fundamental peace project to make internal borders virtually meaningless.

This optimism was not limited to Europe.

At the Asia-Pacific Roundtable in 1994, the keynote speaker was Anwar Ibrahim! He also provided a quite optimistic outlook, stating that the "Asia-Pacific is probably the last region in the world to need confidence building and conflict reduction." On unresolved territorial issues, he added "if they are looked upon as mere irritants, rather than accorded focus and importance totally disproportionate to the reality, then

they will cease to haunt us as a potential threat to regional peace and security.”

Whether we like it or not, geography has come back to haunt us.

Coming back to “Europe between two wars”, there are two major wars in which people are fighting for land. We were told that globalisation had made geography irrelevant, but most of the conflicts in our neighbourhood are territorial. In the case of Palestine, for a land that has been promised to two people. In the case of Ukraine, for a land at the crossroads of two worlds.

At the same time, we see an acceleration of the global trends. The climate breakdown is already here. The technological transitions – such as Artificial Intelligence – are bringing changes that we cannot fully grasp.

The EU has to adapt rapidly to these challenges. To some extent, this has always been the case. One of our founding fathers, Jean Monnet, knew it from the start: “Europe will be forged in crisis”, he said. But now both the urgency and the gravity of the challenges leads to voices that the EU as a peace project could die, nothing less.

After decades of enjoying the perceived peace dividend after the end of the Cold War, as HRVP Borrell said,

“Europe has to learn to use the language of power” again. Not by choice. Our peace project was driven by the rejection of power politics. We largely succeeded in avoiding power politics among the states that joined the European Project.

We believed that partnerships based on trade would bring peace and good relationships around the world. This was the driving force of our foreign policy, which, alas, proved to be optimistic, not to say naïve...

Therefore, now, we have to adjust our software. In the face of two major wars, in order to protect our values and interests, we have to look at the world the way it really is and not the way we want it to be.

III.

From a European perspective, what do we have to do?

First, I will continue to talk about the wars in our vicinity.

We need a clear assessment of the dangers of Russia. Russia is an existential threat for us, and we have to have a clear-eyed assessment of this risk.

When I became a diplomat in 1994, things looked very differently. Both Russia and Ukraine signed a “Partnership for Peace” with NATO, paving the way to what later became the NATO-Russia Council and NATO-

Ukraine Commission. 1994 was also the year of the Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia signed to guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine.

Looking again at the proceedings of the 1994 Asia-Pacific Roundtable, I noticed that a panel on Human Rights under the title of “From Confrontation to Cooperation” was actually co-chaired by a Senior Official from the Russian MFA.

Today’s reality is very different. Under Putin’s leadership, Russia has returned to an imperialist understanding of the world. Imperial concepts from Tzarist Russia and Soviet times have been rehabilitated.

In Georgia 2008 or the Crimea of 2014 we refused to see the evolution of Russia under Putin’s watch. Even though Putin himself had warned us at the Munich Security Conference in 2007.

HRVP Borrell frequently shares the story of his visit to the Donbas in January 2022, some weeks before the invasion started. Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal asked Borrell: “When they invade us, because they will invade us – there are 150,000 Russian troops on the other side of the border – what are you going to do? Are you going to support us? I am sure that young Europeans will not go to die for Kyiv. But are you going

to provide us with the arms that we need in order to resist the invasion?”

That question, at that time, in the middle of the darkness and the cold of the winter, Borrell could not answer. The European Union had never provided arms to a country at war.

However, when the invasion came, our answer was remarkable and very much united in order to provide Ukraine with the military capacity they need to resist. For as long as it takes. The EU has stepped up and quickly created new instruments, such as the European Peace Facility. Since the beginning of the invasion, the EU has supported Ukraine with at least 96 billion Euros in military aid, arms, equipment, training, as well as economic and humanitarian support.

Then, not long after last year's roundtable, another war came. The horrendous terrorist attack by Hamas of 7 October and Israel's disproportionate response plunged the Middle East into the worst cycle of violence in decades. Just before the 7th of October, many believed that the Abraham Accords had diluted the Palestinian issue. Well, they had not! It was a way of making peace between some Arab countries and Israelis, but not between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

My personal memories of 1994 again reflect wasted opportunities. It was actually 1994 when Arafat, Peres and Rabin received the Nobel Peace Prize!

With two wars in our vicinity, we need to ask ourselves: do we in Europe understand the gravity of the moment? Sincerely, I have my doubts. The European Union as a way of living and as a peace project is in danger. Nevertheless, like Jean Monnet, I believe in the capability of the EU to adapt, change and develop in front of the multiple crises.

To face these challenges, I think that we have to work on three dimensions: Principles, Cooperation and Strength.

III.

Let us start with the Principles.

Principles are important because the European Union is a union of values, included in our treaties. From our point of view, they are everything that is good. In principle, it is difficult to disagree with these principles.

Then, there are the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, to put a limit to the actions of the stronger. In the simplest possible terms, those principles

outlawed “the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”

Then, there is International Humanitarian Law to try to regulate how wars are fought and safeguard the protection of civilians. These principles should be the best safeguard against the normalisation of the use of force that we see all over the world, and painfully today in Gaza.

In Kuala Lumpur or elsewhere in the region, I find myself confronted with the accusation of double standards. What is now happening in Gaza has portrayed Europe in a way that many people simply do not understand. They saw our quick engagement and decisiveness in supporting Ukraine and wonder about the way we approach what is happening in Palestine.

I can try explaining how the European Union’s decision-making processes work: unanimity. I can try to explain the different historical experiences of our Member States: very divided among them, as openly displayed in UNGA votes.

However, the outside perception is that the value of civilian lives in Ukraine is not the same than in Gaza, where more than 34,000 are dead, most others displaced, where children are starving, and the humanitarian support is obstructed.

The perception is that we care less if international law is violated by Israel, as opposed to when it is violated by Russia.

The principles that we put in place after the World War II are a pillar of peace. However, this requires that we are coherent in our language. If we call something a “war crime” in one place, we need to call it by the same name when it happens anywhere else.

Hamas has sparked this new cycle of violence with their atrocious attack. Nevertheless, what has happened in Gaza during the following months is another horror. And one horror can never justify another.

Let there be no doubt: The EU is appalled by the unprecedented loss of civilian lives and the critical humanitarian situation and calls for an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire, the unconditional release of all hostages and the unhindered provision of humanitarian assistance. The EU has urged the Israeli government in the strongest terms not to undertake a ground operation in Rafah. Finally, the EU fully supports the Biden peace plan.

The second line of action is cooperation.

Cooperation requires an essential ingredient: Trust.

But in a world where dependencies are increasingly weaponised, trust is in short supply. A trust shortage risks decoupling on technology, trade and values.

There are more and more transactional relationships, but less rules and less cooperation. However, without increased cooperation, we will not tackle great global challenges: climate change, emerging technologies, demographic changes, inequalities.

For a start, we need to reduce excessive dependencies. During the pandemic, we realised that in Europe, we were not producing a single gram of Paracetamol, or that 93% of our surgical gloves were imported from Malaysia. In the moment of crisis, we painfully, pun intended, realised how urgently, we need to reduce our own excessive dependencies.

But also, that we need to diversify our trade links and deepen cooperation with our close friends. Southeast Asian countries are already primary recipients of the resulting new wave of Foreign Direct Investments and have a lot to gain in this context.

However, that is not enough. While we do not share the same values and interests with countries like China, we have to look for ways of cooperating.

Then, we have to have a close look at why parts of the so-called Global South are feeling some resentment

about us, especially with regard to our Green Laws, such as EUDR, and who is going to sustain the massive investment that is needed to address the real and present danger of climate change.

Therefore, we need to find common ground and innovative approaches, but it starts with honest conversations and mutual understanding. And a sense of shared priorities, creating opportunities together!

Malaysia is in a great position to facilitate this kind of discussion, especially in the context of the ASEAN chairmanship 2025. The world will come to Malaysia. The EU stands ready to support meaningful debate, honest discussions and contribute to make the best use of this opportunity. The EU and ASEAN as the world's most successful regional groupings are natural partners.

Last year, during his keynote address at the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable, the Prime Minister exhorted ASEAN to do better: "ASEAN as a regional mechanism has always stepped up when it matters the most. Rooted in our origins, crisis has always made ASEAN stronger and more resilient." I wish the Malaysian Government the best of success in this endeavour.

The last word is about Strength.

There is nothing that authoritarian regimes admire more, than strength, the power of might. If they

perceive you as a weak actor, they will act accordingly. So, let us try to demonstrate strength when talking with authoritarian people.

This is a lesson that we in Europe had forgotten. Maybe because we had been relying on the security umbrella of the United States. But this umbrella may not be open forever, and I believe that we cannot make our security dependent on the US elections every four years.

However, we live in an age of geopolitical upheaval. You call it interregnum.

That is why the European Union continues to develop its defence capabilities. Only a week ago, the EU defence ministers decided to strengthen the EU Defence Industrial and Technological Base. In March, the EU decided to deploy a maritime security operation under the name of ASPIDES to secure shipping routes against Houthi attacks.

The contribution to restoring and safeguarding freedom of navigation and securing supply chains is for the benefit of the EU, the region and the wider international community, Malaysia included.

The EU's Strategic Compass from 2022 is bearing fruits. The work of the European Defence Agency is more relevant than ever before. Moreover, it's likely that you

will soon hear about an EU Commissioner for Defence after the elections, for the first time ever.

Now we experience that there is less trust among the main players; less respect for international law and multilateral agreements; force and coercion are on the rise.

We are living in times in which anything can be weaponised. It is not law, but force, which is increasingly shaping our world.

Against such backdrop, unsurprisingly, all major players continue to expand their military spending. Nowhere to a larger extent than in the Indo-Pacific. But also in Europe the Russian invasion has led to a sharp increase in military expenditure. We live in a dangerous and uncertain world.

We need new, trusted partnerships, we need solutions, and we need commitment to manage the repercussions of strategic uncertainty.

We need to join efforts to fight against the scourge of disinformation and misinformation and the daily cyber threats that we are all subject to.

We need to collectively help our societies fathom that our prosperity is in danger and that we need to

overcome past misconceptions to face the challenges that lie ahead.

IV.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unlike last year, today I have not spoken about the EU's new instruments and initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.

But I want to recall my three conclusions from last year, because I believe they are still relevant.

First, the EU cannot separate economics from security, which are strongly interlinked.

Second, we now live in one geostrategic theatre so that the European security and the security of the Indo-Pacific are interwoven, as so is our common prosperity.

Third, the EU must continue to reinforce its presence and strengthen its engagement in and with the Indo-Pacific. Contributing to regional peace and stability as a smart security enabler.

Linking these points I made last year with the takeaways from my past four years of experience in Malaysia and my thirty years of diplomatic career, I conclude:

There is no “faraway” in a globalised world. Therefore, we see partnership and inclusive cooperation at the

heart of our approach to the Indo-Pacific. It is why our trade agreements, our digital and green partnerships are not merely sectoral or economic measures, but important means to strengthen stability, security and the rules-based international order.

This forms part of our distinctive role in, and offer to, the Indo-Pacific under the Global Gateway Initiative, launched in December 2021 - our offer to help build diversified and secure supply chains and to unlock sustainable investments in partner countries. The initiative has led to highly relevant flagship activities in ASEAN Member States over the past couple of years.

I would like to emphasise that the Indo-Pacific countries can find in the EU a trusted partner willing to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region and its people; a partner with principled and long-term engagement.

The ASEAN chairmanship 2025 will provide a great opportunity to dive deeper into this conversation. This I will leave to my successor, and of course to our future political leaders – actually to be elected this week. I sincerely hope that you will meet them soon here in Malaysia, next year.

For today, let me conclude that it has been a great privilege for me to share a European perspective on

Crisis in an Interregnum with you today. Greek philosopher Aristotle said: “friendship is essentially a partnership”. I am deeply convinced that a stronger and trusted partnership among our nations is fundamental to bring back stability and predictability to the now shuttered world order. And, as Aristotle mentioned that “fine partnership requires trust and duration rather than fitful intensity”, I strongly believe, that EU-Malaysia relations can thrive in this backdrop.

I wish the 37th Asia-Pacific Roundtable successful deliberations, and I look forward to ideas and proposals on how to ensure the necessary amount of cooperation in an increasingly contested world.

Many thanks for your kind attention, and enjoy your lunch!