

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Distinguished Guests,

Allow me to say that I am deeply honoured to address such an exceptional audience.

The security challenges facing the E.U. are substantial and complex. European security is under threat from its eastern neighbours and from the arc of instability spanning the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, Europe is vulnerable to terrorist attacks and must, for the foreseeable future, bear in mind the serious prospect of terrorist acts by organizations, lone actors or ISIS fighters returning from Syria and Iraq. Even Russia remains vulnerable to terrorist attacks, considering the scores of Russians who have joined terrorist groups and fought in the Middle East. There are more terrorist threats around the globe than any Western or Russian intelligence service can handle.

Europe faces direct security threats emanating from North Africa, including terrorism and religious extremism, drug trafficking, illegal migration, refugee flows. Not to mention environmental and climate change.

Large swathes(σουείθς) of the Middle East have collapsed into a state of violence, chaos and division, causing unimaginable amounts of human suffering. Last week's missile attacks on Syria highlight an already existing, highly dynamic and very dangerous situation in the Middle East, with the prospect of further instability.

The uncertainty regarding the exploitation of the Eastern Mediterranean natural gas deposits prevents the EU from becoming independent from monopoly energy sources. This obviously adds another security threat to the whole picture.

The new threats do not mean the EU is necessarily reacting with a greater sense of closeness. This is hardly surprising. Its Lisbon Treaty leaves security matters to member states and it is still particularly hard for EU countries to relinquish sovereignty over

defence and security. National quirks, historical practices, varying constitutional norms, the influence of parliaments: war and peace seem ultimately (όλτιματλι) unsuited to a joint European document.

Although war between EU member states has become almost unthinkable, among these countries there seems to be minimal willingness to confront external threats collectively. In times of empty coffers, most EU states have cut their defence budgets behind the shield of NATO. Power, in the globalized world of the 21st century, is clearly played out through trade relations – the rise of China, for example, or the success of Germany. The EU exists above all for prosperity and soft power, not the cry of war.

Despite all this, some EU members are upholding their traditions of military might, and are prepared to deploy armed forces abroad. This is especially true of France and the UK who, with a 2010 agreement on defence cooperation, took on something of a dual leadership in the area of European

defence and then in 2011 proved their ambitions by leading the military intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya. They did exactly the same last week by joining USA on her attack on Syria.

The attacks on November 13th, 2015 in Paris had an important effect on France and could be a turning point in managing security threats and the war against terrorism in Europe. France and other European countries responded by tightening their security measures and intensifying their commitment to fight 'Daesh'.

In France, a state of emergency was declared, and border controls were restored. In several European countries, the alert level was increased, including in Belgium where a number of the Paris attacks perpetrators originated.

At the European institutions level, EU Justice and Home Affairs ministers adopted on 20th November 2015 a set of conclusions accelerating the implementation of certain counter-terrorism

measures, such as the EU Passenger Name Record directive, firearms, controls of external borders, information sharing, terrorist financing, criminal justice response to terrorism and violent extremism. These measures were added to others adopted by the EU in the last years, such as the revised EU strategy for combating radicalization and recruitment to terrorism and the new rules to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing.

France has also requested assistance from European countries through the activation of article 42 (7) of the Treaty of the European Union. Member states responded to this request by expressing their unanimous and full support to Paris and their readiness to provide all the necessary aid and assistance.

This was the first time the EU mutual assistance clause was invoked, and many questions have arisen regarding its scope. In practice, there is no obligation for EU countries to provide assistance to France. Because of the neutrality of some countries (Ireland, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Malta) and the

vagueness of article 42 (7), the mutual assistance clause does not clearly determine what kind of assistance the member states should bring. However, in a show of European solidarity, Britain launched air strikes on Syria and Germany's parliament has approved a plan to join the military campaign against Daesh.

The adoption of hard-line security measures and the strengthening of military operations against Daesh in Iraq and Syria are necessary to restore the confidence of the worried public and, by all means, limit the strike force of terrorist groups. However, this response will be insufficient if it does not consider the root causes of the problem, particularly political instability in the Middle East and Muslim integration into European society.

When it comes to instability in the Middle East we should bear in mind that Saudi Arabia failed to break Hezbollah's stranglehold over Lebanese politics, and now both Iran and Hezbollah's leadership will be on the alert for any Saudi attempts at interference. Independence pushes by the stateless

Kurds made in 2017 have also created the potential for political and military crises in both Iraq and Syria in 2018. Due to the amphoteric US role in determining the final status of the Syrian state, a combination of powers (alongside the surviving Assad regime) may move against the Syrian Kurds. In Iraq, potential military conflict among the Iraqi government, Kurds, and Shia militias could allow the remnants of the Islamic State (ISIS) to sow chaos, if not on the same scale as before.

For strategic and sectarian reasons, the main forces in the region have other priorities. Assad's regime has little interest in defeating Daesh, his main enemy is the Syrian opposition; the priority of Turkey is the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); and Iraqi Shiites are mainly concerned with defending their sectarian borders, but they seem in no hurry to bring the Sunni Arab minority back into the Iraqi political game.

Lessons from the past show the difficulty of managing the post-war environment in the region. The Iraq war is the most recent example. After 10 years, US forces left the country without

pacifying it. Iraq is divided and the country has become a haven for terrorist groups.

Even if Daesh is destroyed, it will not be conclusive whether or not terrorism is defeated. The group might displace its central command to other countries such as Libya. Additionally, if the Middle East remains unstable, other terrorist groups will emerge.

Zero risk does not exist. Even strong authoritarian states have experienced terrorist attacks, which prove that hard-line security measures alone, will not eliminate the problem.

Regarding the Israeli –Palestinian conflict, the EU is still Israel's biggest trading partner, but its position is eroding as Israel finds new friends in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. With terrorism and security concerns on the rise globally, Israel's new allies put a higher priority on staying in its good graces so they can access intelligence and homeland security technology to counter these threats than on pressing Israel to end the conflict. European countries will probably do the same.

To conclude with.

Middle Eastern crises, with their profound implications for Europe's stability, are closely tied to the EU's difficulties in living up to its own expectations. Europe's crisis, meanwhile, manifests itself through withdrawal and defensive attitudes, which are particularly daunting when it comes to the manifold challenges posed by Europe's immediate neighborhood. Europeans tend to look at the Middle East exclusively as the hotbed of Islamic terrorism and the cradle of the migrant and refugee crisis that began in 2015.

With the few exceptions mentioned previously, the EU has not played a proactive foreign policy role in the Middle East, whether in the Libyan, Syrian, Yemeni, or Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The result has been a series of reactive responses driven by other players, or outright powerlessness.

An alternative reading underlines the strong political message embedded in the humanitarian interventions at the core of the

EU's response to Middle Eastern crises. This course of action is in line with the guiding principles and actions laid out in the June 2016 EU Global Strategy, which aims to endow the states and societies of the region with the necessary instruments and reforms to withstand instability and crisis.

The re-examination of EU foreign policy in the Middle East should be a matter of priority. The EU's presence in the region should not be limited to military action. A viable alternative to the current chaos in the region could be a launch of regional security dialogue. The EU should make every effort, at the diplomatic, political and financial levels, to initiate such a dialogue with the main regional powers. It is true, however, that in the present circumstances, with the involvement of several players in the conflict, a peaceful solution seems difficult to obtain; however, it is necessary that the EU agree and set aside their differences in order to take action in the region. The EU could contribute by taking a leading role as facilitator and key actor in this security dialogue in order to promote peace and security in the region, not only for the cases mentioned above

but also regarding other conflicts in the area and, especially, the Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestine.

Though painful to say, it seems that at the end of the day you can always win your bet about a worsening situation in the Middle East. Despite any hopes or calculations, peace is not on the horizon for 2018.

Thank you very much indeed for your attention