

# The Mediterranean, an Absolute Priority for Europe

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The European Union has long been recognised as one of the leading players on the global stage. With a population of over 500 million, the third largest after China and India, its size and impact in economic, commercial and financial terms are factors that ensure it plays a major role commensurate with its status as an important international power. This it certainly does in development and humanitarian affairs, where Europe is the world's leading donor. The Union is also the world's largest trading bloc: the EU's 27 Member States account for almost 20% of world imports and exports. Nonetheless, while Europe is well regarded as being an economic heavyweight, its political ranking and reach has been constrained from attaining its full potential. The Lisbon Treaty and the formation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) will help us, in the future, to punch at a truer and more representative political weight.

To achieve this we need, therefore, to promote more unity among European Union Member States so that we have that necessary political weight; we also need to forge more integrated strategies in order to be more effective on the ground, to transform that potential into reality.

As I said earlier this year in the European Parliament, the creation of the EEAS represents a huge chance for Europe; this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build something that finally brings together all the instruments of our engagement – economic and political instruments, development and crisis management tools – in support of a single political strategy. We have been asked to make more comprehensive and cohesive strategies as well as integrated and joint action. Lisbon opens the door to that possibility.

By making the right kind of linkages between different policy areas, we can build up European leverage and gain greater international influence. The EEAS will provide effective mechanisms to ensure that long-term development, state-building and peace-building objectives and principles will inform and influence the EU's global political engagement and external action. To meet the challenges ahead I intend to have a functional foreign service in the very near future, a service that will bring together the cream of officials from the European Commission's External Relations Directorate-General and the Council Secretariat, as well as Member State national diplomats. I am fully committed to this challenge, the success of which our citizens demand and our external relations require.

What drives Europe's actions on the global stage? A sense of altruism or pragmatism? The European Union acts out of enlightened self-interest as much as global solidarity. On an increasingly interconnected and interdependent planet, championing and supporting economic development and political stability in the wider world is both insurance and an investment in one's future. This is particularly pertinent in our immediate neighbourhood. The EU cannot ensure its own peace, security and prosperity without ensuring that of its neighbours.

The Mediterranean Basin – the nexus of our neighbourhood and the confluence of three continents – has been intimately linked with Europe for centuries. Our shared history, geography and culture have given rise to the diversity and multiplicity of Euro-Mediterranean identities that lie at the heart of historic relations between Europe and the Mediterranean.

The different cooperation agreements that bind us have served us well through often troubled times. However, there has been a growing consensus and mutual resolve to realign and reinvigorate Euro-Mediterranean relations, to explore new levels of cooperation and partnership.

There are global as well as regional imperatives for the restructuring of relations. This has become increasingly evident as we enter uncertain times in our joint challenges – security, environmental protection, climate change and sustainable energy resources, respect of human rights, the fight against terrorism, a more enlightened and positive governance of immigration and the nefarious spread of organised crime manifested through the trafficking of people, drugs and arms.

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Europe's commitment to an active role in the Mediterranean is demonstrated by its support for the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and through our European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). This combination of multilateral and bilateral arrangements underlines very clearly where we stand. The Mediterranean is, and will continue to be, an absolute priority for Europe. The EU wants to work with its Mediterranean partners as real partners, to deal with the common problems I have outlined above that no individual country can tackle successfully on its own. The ENP and UfM are complementary and contributory mechanisms aiming to foster the development of Europe's southern neighbourhood.

Now, with the Secretariat of the UfM established and functioning in Barcelona, the city of the Partnership's birth, I am confident that we can take relations to new and improved heights.

This being said, we also have to acknowledge that the UfM is not and cannot operate in a political vacuum. The resolution of the Middle East conflict is therefore essential if we are to progress towards regional integration and sustainable peace. Europe's position on this has been constant and clear: the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict is a strategic priority for us. Only negotiations aimed at agreement on the final status issues can deliver a secure and stable future for both Palestinians and Israelis. The Lisbon Treaty now opens up new possibilities for more integrated EU efforts at conflict prevention and resolution, making use of all relevant instruments.

However, let me emphasise that, while the political and economic challenges will engage our respective governments and institutions, we should not lose sight of the most important constituent and asset of our Partnership – its people. Treaties, cooperation agreements, mechanisms, etc. exist to fire the engines of our diplomacy and dialogue. Our people fire the spirit of that partnership. I believe, therefore, that it is now time, overdue even, to bring the partnership closer to the people, to move from the elite to the street. It is equally important while taking the political pulse to also listen to the human heart of the relationship. A partnership is, after all, for and about people. So, as we draft grand designs for political and economic relations between both sides of the Mediterranean we should ensure that the social and human aspects of that relationship are not forgotten and that people are at the core of our programmes and projects.

We will continue with our joint efforts to improve the lives and livelihoods of people in the region. However, we must also recognise that we have not always been successful in our endeavours. Certain shortcomings have distanced recognition of these efforts from wider popular acceptance. Our partnership has known good and bad times. A gulf between expectations and achievements is evident. There is a political and popular perception that needs to be redressed by injecting new confidence and dynamism into our relations. Despite the tempering of ambitions by the continuing conflicts in the region, there is still a perceptible political will to make efforts towards closer and more cohesive relations. Now is the time to capitalise on that will.

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Let me repeat that the Mediterranean, Europe's southern neighbourhood, is an absolute priority for Europe. Together we can close the gap between ambition and achievement, and place people at the epicentre of our efforts by charting out a more confident future.