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**Speech by President of the European Council
Herman Van Rompuy
at the Conference
"The EU in International Affairs"**

It is a pleasure to open the third edition of this conference. And I gladly accepted the invitation to say a few words.

Because it is my conviction that the exchange between academics and politicians can help us -- all of us -- to better understand the nature of political institutions, and the challenges of today's world.

It has been almost two and a half years since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty.

Can we already judge the success of the European External Action Service and other innovations on the international stage?

Or is it still -- paraphrasing Zhou Enlai's quote about the French Revolution -- "too early to say"?

Two preliminary remarks.

First remark.

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty roughly corresponded with the start of the sovereign debt crisis, one of the most existential crisis the European Union has faced in its history.

Of course, there was no link between the two phenomena.

No: "cum hoc, ergo propter hoc."

P R E S S

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Yet the impact of this event makes a clear-cut comparison of the EU "before" and "after" Lisbon almost impossible.

Or to speak the Latin of the scientists again: you cannot apply a simple "ceteris paribus" formula... and put all the external changes between brackets.

No, we are not in a laboratory (laboratoire), we are in History.

In politics.

Second preliminary remark.

Today I will focus, for once, on our tools, more than on our objectives.

For sure, the objectives are more fundamental. Where do we want to go? What kind of power do we want to be?

But the Lisbon Treaty was above all about improving the Union's, tools, not least in foreign policy.

So I thought it might be of interest for you if I shared some experiences of the past 2 years. Personal and institutional experiences, which may feed into your research.

Be it your research on strategic partnerships, on the neighbourhood, on the institutions, or on -- a word I learnt in your program -- "EU-actorness"...

The Lisbon Treaty offers three new main tools for the Union's foreign policy.

The first two are: the diplomatic service and the office of High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission.

I am not an expert on the Union's new diplomatic service play. Let me just say that, in my experience, the transition from Commission offices (or Commission and Council offices) into EU Delegations all over the world -- even if far from easy in practical terms -- has been smooth. On my diplomatic journeys I have been very well-served on practical and a wide range of policy matters by the Union's offices in Tokyo, Beijing, Washington and many others. I have also witnessed on the ground how EEAS diplomats in those and other capitals excel in facilitating, coordinating and guiding the positions of the 27. EU delegations have taken over the role of the rotating Presidency. This groundwork is fundamental to give the Union a credibility vis-à-vis our partners.

The High Representative, Catherine Ashton, gives the EU diplomacy an ever more assertive role in the world: personally bringing the Kosovars and Serbians around the table, negotiating on the Union's behalf with Iran, taking initiatives in the Middle East Peace Process as our representative in the Quartet. These are considerable achievements. And I have no doubt that they will be acknowledged in present and future research, starting in the upcoming days right among you.

Yet this brings me, after the diplomatic service and the High Representative, to the third innovation of the Lisbon Treaty related to the Union's role in the world: the establishment of a permanent Presidency of the European Council.

I am well aware that, as first incumbent of this new post I, too, am in a way an object of your research...!

So I will try to start objectively...!

And what more objective place to start than the Treaty?

Article 15 of the EU-Treaty defines the role of the European Council and of its President, of whom it is said: "The President of the European Council shall, at his level and in that capacity, ensure the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its common foreign and security policy, without prejudice to the powers of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy."

The established practice, "pre-Lisbon", that the President or Prime-Minister of the rotating Presidency represented the Union at his or her level, together with the President of the Commission, has thus been codified in the Treaty.

From the perspective of the European Council Presidency, the other main innovation of 'Lisbon' concerns the establishment the new relationship to time the Treaty provides.

The change is summarised in one word: continuity. The permanent Presidency gives the Union a chairman and face to the outside world at the level of Heads of State or Government (where ever more diplomatic activity takes place) for a period of five or ten times longer than previously was the case under the rotating Presidency.

Knowing the importance of personal contacts in foreign relations, this can be a powerful asset. Thus for me the vital question has been: how can we best use this stronger continuity internally and in dealing with the Union's global partners?

The bilateral summits between the European Union and its ten strategic partners are a clear case in point. Seeing each other officially and regularly (once a year; with Russia twice per year) means that a real dialogue can develop. No temptation to reset priorities every semester. It also means that certain issues do not have to be solved immediately -- a permanent Presidency does not need a "success" at the end of every six months! -- but that in some cases one can wait for a more propitious moment to find an agreement.

I also represent the European Union in multilateral fora, such as the G8, the G20, the OSCE, NATO and the United Nations. This gave me the privilege of speaking to the UN General Assembly in September 2011, as the first EU representative ever not speaking on behalf of his or her own Member State. Another innovation made possible by the Lisbon Treaty.

Furthermore, it has proven useful to engage our partners on the decisions to deal with the crisis in the Eurozone, as well as to use the summit diplomacy to further our internal agenda of economic growth: a mutual interest in each other's economic situation reflects today's global interdependence.

We are aware that people in other economies look at us, since our problems may affect their jobs, pensions or savings. We likewise expect the other major economies to take responsibility for their own internal challenges. It is in their interest that the European Union and the eurozone in particular put those difficulties behind them. But it is equally also in Europe's interest that the US stabilises its public debt situation, or that China stimulates its domestic demand and make its exchange rate more flexible. Each has to bring their house in order. This has been a constant theme in all my international meetings.

Obviously the financial crisis has accelerated some long-term trends. Global economic power is shifting - to the emerging countries, to the Pacific. "Business as usual" would consign us to a gradual relative decline. Yet rising levels of prosperity around the world are also an opportunity. We can improve our trade performance and attract more foreign investment. Free trade agreements play a role here. In our quest for growth, the European Council therefore decided to our efforts to engage the growth of those partners whose markets are expanding at a significant pace. For instance, the October 2011 European Council meeting discussed how to use these relations more strategically.

Obviously such contacts and dialogues with our global partners presuppose a sense of direction: where do we want to go as a Union? Setting the strategic compass is the European Council's main task. Or to use Treaty language once more (this time Art. 22): the body "shall identify the strategic interests and objectives of the Union" in matters relating "to the common foreign and security policy and to other areas of the external action of the Union".

That is why I have found it important to put foreign affairs *stricto sensu* on the agenda of almost all our meetings. This ranges from preparing a European position for upcoming bilateral summits or multilateral summits such as the G8 and the G20, to discussing matters of common concern, such as the Arab spring. This regularity enhances the sense of ownership among the Heads of State and Government for the Union's foreign policy.

In September 2010, we devoted almost the entire European Council meeting to Europe's place in the world, concentrating on strategic relations with the United States, Russia and China. All colleagues stressed that we must have the instruments and demand reciprocity in order to translate the Union's messages into concrete progress. Our values will be more respected if they are backed up by firmness. That also means: entering into a game of negotiations and give-and-take. Even if the Member States do not all have the same interests on all issues, there are a substantial number of cards that we can only play together, like the access to our single market or visa liberalisation. In subsequent meetings to date, such as the one from October last year, we are building upon this change of perspective.

There is another European Council I should like to mention here . It does not concern the long-term strategy, but short-term crisis management. I mean the extraordinary Summit on Libya of 11 March 2011. In that meeting, the 27 Heads of State and Government formulated the three conditions that allowed the UN Security Council, a few days later, to pass the famous Resolution 1973 on the "responsibility to protect" the people of Libya.

This in itself shows how seriously the Union's leaders were taking the imminent threat of a bloodbath in Libya, in Benghazi. To compare: the other emergency summits followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (2001), the start of the Iraq War (2003) and the August War between Russia and Georgia (2008). To the extent that diplomacy is also about dealing with unexpected events, it was a sign that the European institutions are capable of absorbing external shocks and channelling Member States' energies into a partial common response.

I have focussed discussions also on the Union's relationship with our neighbourhood. Of course: we must reflect about the geostrategic changes which take place in the Pacific today, and influence these to the extent possible. There is no doubt about it. Yet our global credibility starts at home. By being able to deal with our neighbourhood -- and the offer of a European perspective to the Western Balkans is key in this respect. Croatia will become the Union's 28th Member State, as of July next year. Serbia, Montenegro and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia have candidate status. The EU also has a close relationship with six other eastern neighbours, thanks to the so-called 'Eastern Partnership'. This framework for economic and political cooperation involves Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; the last summit was hosted by Poland and chaired by me. It also means we are following the situation in these countries closely and in that context I must say that the recent developments in Ukraine are appalling. And the situation in Belarus still gives reason of great concern.

Credibility starts at home, I said, in our neighbourhood but also by showing we are dealing with and overcoming our own economic crisis (which brings me back to my opening remark...).

All in all, the European Union is making progress in getting its act together on the international stage. Setting up a new institutional structure always takes time in all situations. That's why in judging the achievements so far, one must keep a sense of proportion. Often however, public comments went from the exaggerated expectations regarding the new Treaty beforehand, to the equally superficial disappointment that Member States still have different views and interests.

To give one example of the latter tendency: the abstention of Germany in the aforementioned March 2011 UN-vote on Libya was decried by some as if it were the end of an EU foreign policy. Most observers failed to notice that the German Chancellor was present three days later at the Elysée-summit which by consensus launched the military operations. Moreover, a short-lived divergence like this one pales in comparison to the deep intra-European cleavages at the time of the Iraq War. We have common positions on Syria, Iran, even the Middle East Peace Process, so on issues concerning the world's most dangerous region. Nous avons fait du chemin!

We are moving forward, step by step. That's why individual breakthroughs count, too; like the Union's newly acquired enhanced status in the UN, which I mentioned before.

Setting precedents, step by step: that's how Europe has always made progress, especially in an arena which is as delicate as foreign affairs. There is no reason this slow but steady movement towards greater coherence would come to a halt – on the contrary.

As I said in my speech to the College of Europe in February 2010, in speaking and writing about the Union's foreign affairs, one should not lose sight of Europe's intrinsic tension between 'the one' and 'the many'. That's why I suggested back then to compare the European Union, not to either one ship or 27 autonomous boats, but to a convoy. "A convoy of 27 ships finding its way across the geopolitical waves. Picture them: 27 ships, each flying their own flag and that of the European Union too. The wind makes them drift apart some of the time, gets them to sail in the same direction at other times." Building on the progress which the Union already has achieved under 'Lisbon', I consider it my task, for the remainder of my mandate, to continue to help the Union find its compass.
