Speech by High Representative Catherine Ashton at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico City, 10 February

It's my great pleasure to be talking to the students of UNAM today. My favourite part of any discussion is the questions and answer session, so I really hope you will feel this is an opportunity to ask me about the European Union, about our relations with Mexico, about the work we are doing across the world or any of the issues of the day.

Let me just say a couple of things about the relationship between Mexico and the EU. Mexico is our strategic partner, and it's a unique strategic partner, because not only do we have a strong bilateral political relationship, which is a description of a strategic partnership, but we also have a strong economic relationship, with an Association and Free Trade Agreement. And that's a unique relationship - it's the only one with both elements together. So it's a particular pleasure to be in Mexico to celebrate that unique relationship. It means that we work together in a number of different ways.

Let me describe a couple of them. It means that on some of the challenges that you face in dealing with economic change and that Europe faces in dealing with economic change, we come together, partly through our Free Trade Agreement, which means we positively invest in each other. A Free Trade Agreement means we celebrate open markets between each other. We are a significant investor in Mexico - 37% of the foreign direct investment comes from Europe and I am very proud of that. This is a dynamic country, growing by 4% last year, demonstrating its strength economically more and more.

It also means that we face the challenges in the world together. The obvious example is climate change, where we have led the world with our support not just in Cancun, but also in Durban, and we worked together as partners to try and deal with one of the greatest problems that we face, which is how to ensure that we can have both growth and development and yet save our climate and support countries and people going through the dramatic changes that climate change creates - famine, flood - changes that affect their ability to have growth and changes that affect the way people need to live and work. This is a really important example of our work together.
It's not the only one. I will becoming back to Mexico next weekend for the meeting of G-20 foreign ministers, who will for the first time, upon the invitation of your minister, come together and talk about issues like sustainable development and the work we can do internationally. And I am very proud to be coming back to Mexico to celebrate the first informal G-20 foreign ministers meeting under the chairmanship of Mexico.

But I would also like to talk about the European Union in more general terms and about my role, created by the Lisbon Treaty. If we go back in time 50 years, when the European countries began to collaborate together especially on economic issues, when countries across Europe recognised that if they could trade together, if they could grow their economies together and if they could support their regions together, they would have a new kind of market and new opportunities. And that was the beginning of the European Union, the bringing together of different countries economically, the ability to cross borders easily, the ability to be able to build businesses across the EU. And that economic coming together of a few countries - starting with 6 and then growing, to 12, 15, 25, 27 and soon to be 28 - was a strong and dynamic economic union that still works today and will see Europe through this difficult economic time into strong economic growth of the future.

But at the same time the leadership of the EU also recognised there was a strength in their political discussions, a strength of being able to speak with many voices, but with the same message. The strength of what you can do in the world if countries could find a common cause, common approaches to some of the issues of today. I mentioned climate change. Obviously if Europe makes a decision it has a much more dramatic effect in a certain policy than if one or two or three countries make such a decision. So we began to have discussions on how we can develop that political voice and how to develop the voice in terms of Europe's relationship with the world: how Europe could more effectively join up economics and politics.

And the Lisbon Treaty for me is about "economics meets politics". Let me give you an example of what the system used to be, before we had the President of the European Council and the High Representative. Every six months the leadership of the European Union changed, we had a rotating presidency, which would move from country to country. It still does, but not in foreign policy. If you were President Putin - in his 8-year term he met 16 presidents of Europe, beginning and ending with Portugal. That meant that every six months he was dealing with a different leadership. Of course the messages were similar, but the relationships with countries were different. Some leaders he would know well, some he would not know at all.

So in foreign policy the decision was taken to have a longer time in office, so that the relationships could develop and flourish and there would be a continuity of approach. The Lisbon Treaty created the solution - individual countries still have strong domestic agendas and strong bilateral relationships, like in Mexico where many EU countries have their embassies, but they also come together as a team, as a European family, and that team works together on behalf of the EU.

On my level, as a President of Foreign Affairs Council, I meet every month with foreign ministers of 27 - soon to be 28 when Croatia joins the EU - Member States and we work through our responses, reactions, policies to the issues of the day and the countries of the world. So the agenda might include our relationship with China, discussion on our relationship with Mexico, it might include a debate on changes that are ongoing in North Africa, countries like Egypt, Tunisia or events in Syria. At those meetings our common policy will be determined which then translates into the work that's done on the ground, with our delegations and our Ambassadors and with our colleagues in the countries with which we are developing relationships.
When I took on this office I decided on three key priorities for my mandate. The first was based on the fact that you can't just create a policy, you also have to make it work on the ground. We have to bring together economics and politics, in our heads of delegations, in teams that work on the ground, but also in fusing together of the EU’s political and economic activity. So as well as work from EU institutions on trade, economic growth, direct investment, we also work on issues of development, climate change and our political relationships together. On human rights, on how we approach the United Nations, how we work on issues that define our world.

My first priority was to build a new foreign policy service, a foreign service for Europe that every Member State can be proud of, that every Ambassador could feel the added value to the work done from a national perspective. This in a sense raised the EU to be a foreign policy actor that people recognise, recognise its strength and contribution to the challenges of the day.

The second priority I set for myself was the neighbourhood - we should be judged as the EU on how effective we are in our neighbourhood, our own backyard. Countries that surround us, our immediate neighbours, our work with them, our support for them, their development, will be critical not just for them, but also for us. And that means working with those countries, to support them as they move in some cases in quite dramatic ways towards democracy. And to use the experience of the Members of the EU who themselves made similar journeys not so long ago, from forms of oppression to democracy, where the rights of people - of assembly, of expression, human rights - were first and last of the core, of the heart of democracy they created. All of that experience is there, all of the experience of the people who created that is available, though they will do it in their own way.

And equally building strong economies, because we need good, economically strong neighbours with whom we can trade, we need growing markets for our own goods and we need strong economies that can sell us the things that we need. And we need educated people, a highly educated workforce - some of them will come to work in the EU, but most of them will not. They will develop their countries and the neighbourhood too. The challenge for Europe is how to help our neighbourhood economically and politically, sharing the values that we hold in common with you and hold in common with people across the world.

It also means preventing conflict. I come from the part of the world where conflict has been with us for centuries and where one of the great joys of the European Union is that we solve our problems across the table, there is no prospect or thought of conflict. But around us there are countries who still find themselves at risk of conflict, internally or between countries. We think of what happened in what used to be Yugoslavia and how the Western Balkans now moves into a new phase of growth and development and sees itself as part of the European Union of the future. We see the ongoing changes in Egypt and the changes that happened in Tunisia, where elections have taken place, government is in place and where the Prime Minister made his first visit outside his country to Brussels to recognise that his first partner was the EU.
All of that we have to be engaged in if we want to create stability and security for the people of the neighbourhood and for ourselves. Foreign policy matters to everybody - if we get good trade agreements, people get jobs. People in Mexico have jobs and a growing economy, because you are also growing in trade and in your relationships around the world. It's good as well to have a peaceful and secure neighbourhood because that supports the peace and security of your own people, enables people to travel, to not have to spend huge amounts of resources on some of the areas of policy that they would have to if our neighbourhood found itself in great conflicts. All of that neighbourhood work is in the interest of the EU and the neighbourhood. It's also critical if we are to be taken seriously by the rest of the world, including Mexico.

And then my third priority - strategic partners. If we want to be effective in the world, we need to do things together, we all do. And we need to do them through organisations like the United Nations, we need to do them through the G-20, we need to do that through the Human Rights Council and we need to do that sometimes as bilateral partners, in order to take forward our initiatives and ideas.

Those partnerships have two big challenges: how to make sure that we are working as effectively as we can to develop together, so we have shared values between us, how do we make sure that we put those on the ground, how do we make sure that the people in the EU and Mexico see the strength of our relationship, how do we support each other bilaterally in some of the great challenges that we face? This country is faced with the challenge of organised crime and our support is to help your judges and your police forces to be as effective as possible, but we only do it if you ask us to. It's your country, your choices, we are partners and friends.

And then secondly: working together in tackling the challenges of the world. I talked about climate change, a very obvious one for your country, and here we are working together. But when I met your Foreign Minister we also talked about the Middle East Peace Process; she is very engaged and interested in how Mexico can be supportive. And we talked about the challenge of Iran and their quest for nuclear weapons. I am the chief negotiator with the Iranians, trying to persuade them not to go down that road. And having the support of Mexico in this message is enormously important, because we are stronger when we all stand together. Those are two different ways in which how strategic partners make a difference.

Let me finish - my priorities are a strong service that Europe and the world can be proud of, to resolve the issues of our neighbourhood, to work with countries that need to define their own future, and to build strong relationships with strategic partners to tackle the global challenges that we face. I hope that as you grow into your professional careers in the future, that you will be able to look back at this and recognise that what I have started has come to pass. It's a long journey - you can't build what I have described quickly, it takes time to build the foundations and to work through all the challenges. But I am absolutely committed and believe passionately in what the EU can do in partnership with others to try and support people all over the world that at this time need help and support to be everything they can be. Thank you.