Opening address by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the symposium on the Common Security and Defence Policy, Washington DC, 8 May 2013

Thank you very much Congressman, Ambassador. Can I say how delighted I am to be in Washington and to have the opportunity to open the second symposium on the European Union's Security and Defence Policy.

Last year I was very disappointed that I couldn't be with you, so I was extremely pleased that we were able to schedule this at a time when I could be.

The focus of our debates today is about this transatlantic partnership and how we can make it work better for global security.

I recognize, as I begin to speak, that we continue to operate in challenging financial circumstances. Defence is clearly being affected by the economic situation that we all face. Budgets are shrinking. Although total global military spending still exceeds the numbers at the peak of the Cold War, military expenditure as a percentage of total spending has decreased for the first time since 1998 (by about 0.5 per cent between 2011 and 2012).

In the decade since 2001, the US share of NATO defence expenditure has increased from 63% to 77%. And as the United States begins to look at how to cut back itself—how to re-engineer its defence expenditure—I believe that Europeans need to shoulder the burden of our own security.

I've no doubt too that the trend for shrinking budgets is unlikely to be reversed anytime soon. And at the same time, security challenges are growing. Traditional threats, regional conflicts, fragile states, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—those are as relevant and as difficult as ever.
But adding to that are the new threats that have emerged. Look at the effects of climate change, the risk that that creates for, for example, mass migration. What happens in terms of piracy that threatens the disruption of crucial trade routes (particularly a vulnerability for the European Union, as 90% of our trade is conducted by sea); cyber attacks that threaten critical infrastructure; energy grids; hospitals; business; these threats are directly affecting the security and the well-being of all of our citizens.

Like the United States, the European Union is ready to play our part in strong security partnerships that provide security both in our own neighborhood and beyond. We are deeply engaged, and we will remain deeply engaged in a whole range of crisis management issues.

But I maintain that to do this we need to make better use of our resources. Europe's potential is enormous. European Union Member States have strong military industries (a turnover of 94 billion euros in 2010 alone). They spend almost 200 billion euros a year on defence between the Member States of the European Union. And just to put that in perspective, that's more than China, Japan and Russia spend added together.

But we are not making the best use of these considerable resources. No fewer than 23 different types of armoured vehicles with varying calibres of ammunition will be commissioned in Europe in the next 10 years. European armed forces have 7 types of combat helicopters and four types of main battle tanks.

EU Member States armed forces have roughly 3000 jet fighters, but only 40 are capable of refuelling other aircraft in the air.

And that's why one of the main focuses of my job is the coordination and cooperation of our defence capabilities – what we in the European Union call Pooling and Sharing.

We need to make sure that our key capabilities are preserved and that can only be done through cooperation. In plain terms, the choice is this: We either pool it, or we're going to lose it.

There are some good examples, I'm pleased to say, of how we're beginning to pool and share more effectively. The Netherlands and Belgium, for example, no longer do national naval planning. Their navies commission equipment jointly, but retain separate fleets.

The European Defence Agency, which I head, is dedicated to enhancing this capability development, including through cooperation in Research and Technology. The EDA is now looking at ways to widen and deepen cooperation on Air-to-Air-Refueling, as well as looking at pioneer projects on Cyber Defence and Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems.

But to be more effective in addressing the security challenges we face, we not only need to spend our money and develop our capabilities better, we need to make sure that we use them as part of a joined-up strategic approach to crises and threats. And that means bringing all of the different aspects of EU action together in what I call the Comprehensive Approach – something which only the European Union as a whole can do, and something which I believe makes us an effective foreign and security partner for our allies such as the United States of America.
By coordinating what we do on security with what we do on development with our diplomatic activity, we can look at the problems in our regions in a long-term, strategic way, making the best use of the resources and maximizing their effectiveness. Working with our strategic partners like the US and international organizations, not least the United Nations, we can address the underlying causes of the security challenges we face as well as dealing with the symptoms.

That was the idea behind the creation in the Lisbon Treaty of my role and the purpose of bringing into being a European External Action Service, which I've designed to try and deliver on these responsibilities. If you like, it's my role to act as the catalyst to make sure that we draw systematically on all of the instruments at our disposal: diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, development, security.

Let me describe what I mean by giving you some real examples.

I want to talk briefly about what we're doing in the Horn of Africa. In order to try and work out how to effectively support development, in every sense of that word, in the Horn of Africa, we've put together a Joint Strategic Framework. I appointed an EU Special Representative to look after the region. We've trained 3,000 Somali troops (that's about a third of their armed forces personnel), through a mission that we have in Uganda. You've worked in the United States very closely with us on this, providing assistance, for example, in air transport and with financial support.

The troops that we've trained are now the core of the Somali Armed forces. And we've provided, in addition, crucial financing to AMISOM. I have been closely involved in our diplomatic efforts; I went to Mogadishu last August, in order to help support the crucial phase of the transition that we saw take place in that country.

Our mission, which we called EUCAP Nestor, was launched last year to assist Somalia and the countries of the region, in order to help support them to build their own capacity to deal with the challenge of piracy. And what we've seen is piracy decrease by 95% in the past two years, not least because of the work of Operation Atalanta, the mission of the European Union again in collaboration with NATO and forces from across the world, in deterring, preventing, capturing, and leading to the prosecution of pirates at sea.

But we all know there is no room for complacency. And the conference that took place in London yesterday was another component of the European Union strategy, that we believe is about developing a long-term process for Somalia that can ensure that after more than 20 years of civil strife, the country can move forward. And that means working with our development colleagues as the armies move forward and remove the threat of Al Shabaab from different communities in Somalia. The development follows: the building of schools; the provision of jobs; work with local communities to ensure that they don't go backwards; and working with the government to put in place the institutions that they're going to need to be able to be effective as the country goes forward—all of the different tools in operation together.

A second example would be what's happening currently in the Sahel. Here too we've agreed a strategic framework for the work that we do across the region, working with the ministers of each of the countries, collaboratively and collectively, a strategy that we put in place before the recent crisis in Mali erupted. We also brought forward and launched the training mission in Mali, in response to the urgent needs of the Malian government and the Malian people. And that began to deliver immediately military advice, collaborating very closely, of course, with France on the ground.
The training of the first battalion of the Malian military is underway. 22 of our Member States have contributed people and resources, and more than 2000 soldiers will be trained to provide security in the country.

And that's an example of a place where we are also developing our "joint programming" – where we try and deliver our aid more effectively. Anyone looking at the challenges of the Sahel will see populations, especially in the north of each country, who are disconnected from the south, and who need to have very basic support. The Sahel suffers from hunger, from a lack of development, from a lack of education, from lack of economic opportunities, from security threats and risks. It has a multiplicity of challenges which need to be addressed in a comprehensive way if we're going to be successful, and in which the military operation is absolutely key and crucial in order to be able to support each country individually and the region as a whole. That's why also we've developed in Niger the capacity through our mission to be able to help them to fight terrorists and organized crime.

And so too when we look at the neighborhood in which the European Union operates, I've often said that Europe should be judged by its effectiveness in its own neighborhood. It's why it's so important that we've played the crucial role in the work between Serbia and Kosovo, and the implementation teams are meeting today in Brussels to put the political agreement into practical action.

But also when we look at what's happening in our southern neighborhood, countries going through dramatic change, we’ve been looking to find ways in which we can bring together the support that we offer—what I sometimes describe as economics meets politics—in support of building what must be eventually deep democracy.

It means building the institutions that are going to be necessary in countries like Libya where they simply did not exist, embedding the rule of law and good governance, as well as of course, the silver thread of respect for human rights that needs to run throughout. None of this can be done without at the same time pursuing the extremely important economic governance that needs to take place. So we've worked with Tunisia, with Egypt, with Jordan, with all of the countries of our southern neighborhood to try and pull together, collaborating with financial institutions, with parliaments, with others who can provide both economic and political support in order to put in place real plans that can help these countries go through difficult but important transition periods. Huge amounts of money pulled together through our work, but as importantly, the big challenge of trying to support people who want to see their countries moving to democratic freedom. Anyone looking at the region today can see what those challenges currently are. But everything, from how you secure the borders of Libya, to how you develop an economic plan for Egypt, to how we support Jordan currently going through tremendous challenges with all of the refugees coming through—from Syria, 7000 every day—all of this needs to be done in a comprehensive and effective way.

I mentioned already Serbia and Kosovo, but I just want to return to the Balkans, because here is a wonderful example where the European Union and the United States have worked effectively together. In everything from the talks themselves where the US played an important role, but also, I remember with great affection the joint trip I did with former Secretary Clinton to the region in October of last year, and the collaboration we've had with NATO in our work in that region too. Good cooperation with EULEX Kosovo and KFOR on the ground—it's so important to see how support for peace and security through the military and through the support for the police, through the building of the judiciary, all of these different elements of how you ensure the rule of law is effective. These are good examples to me of how we develop our approach in a comprehensive and important way.
I would argue too that our Transatlantic Partnership is key to everything we do in security and defence. The interests that we saw last year in this workshop and again this year shows to me the importance of this mutual interest in this field. Like no two other partners in the world, we share the same values; we share the same interests.

Last year we signed with the United States the agreement to allow US participation in EU missions. It was a really important step forward because now we can invite the United States to join with us. You've engaged with our training mission in Somalia. You deployed with us in the Congo. And you make a crucial contribution, as I've indicated, to the work we're doing in EULEX Kosovo.

I really want to see how we can enhance that cooperation further – including, by the way, in the UN framework. We give, in the European Union, about 40% of funding to UN Peace Keeping; the United States gives 30%. So together, we give 70%. I think we should use that to make sure that we closely coordinate all of our policies in this regard.

I want to say a little bit too about the relationship with NATO which I've eluded to. The breadth of what we can do in the European Union can be usefully combined with the depth of what NATO can do on defence. I work very closely with Secretary General Rasmussen. I attend NATO foreign minister and defence minister meetings; he attends our meetings of defence ministers which I chair. We are both determined to bring the European Union and NATO closer through a very pragmatic step-by-step approach. We have close staff-to-staff cooperation, including on Pooling & Sharing and on Smart Defence. After all, the capabilities that are developed by EU Member States ultimately benefit both the European Union and NATO.

And we are committed more than anything to this Transatlantic Partnership, and committed to taking on responsibility and being a reliable and international player.

For the European Union, 2013 is the year of "Defence matters." Our Council President Herman van Rompuy has put the issue on the agenda of the December European Council of Heads of state and government. It will be their opportunity to discuss priorities for future investment; how we procure equipment; the strengthening our industrial base; and how we remain competitive and innovative; and finally, the preparation and availability of our forces.

Closer cooperation in a field as sensitive as defence is challenging. It's challenging, and it's absolutely necessary. In an age when cooperation and coordination are what makes a difference in terms of our security, I believe more than anything that our transatlantic relationship has never been more important.

Thank you.