

**EU OFFICE TO HONG KONG AND MACAO**

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## **Speech by Vincent Piket at "Building Peace in Northeast Asia: An International Conference"**

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As EU representative, I am particularly grateful for being part of this conference, because the European Union is a peace project, and peace continues to be the fundamental purpose of the European Union. The EU can and should share its experiences with others around the world, including in Northeast Asia, where I hope it can be a source of inspiration.

To see what the European Union means to its citizens, one has to consider the lived experience of citizens in the EU. They can travel across national borders without having to show their passports; foreign visitors enjoy the same ease of travel. They can live, work, and invest in different member states than their own. They can study across borders and have their degrees recognised. They pay with the same currency in the Eurozone, which accounts for most of the Member States.

Most importantly, three generations now have only known peace since they were born. For the 508 million EU citizens, war between their nations has become almost inconceivable. For advancing the causes of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe, the EU received the Nobel peace prize in 2012.

Yet, if we take pride in what Europe has achieved, we do so from a very humble position. Because the EU was not always the region of peace it is now. It was born out of the ashes of two devastating world wars. In 2014, we mark the century of the breakout of the First Great War. We called it "The War to End all Wars". Yet, little more than

twenty years, in 1939, we descended into another World War, a war that saw the cruellest of genocides.

But after the Second World War, we saw a change. Truly visionary political leaders came together on the common realisation that there must be no more wars on the European continent. They realised that only by bringing former enemies together around common interests, by finding common solutions to shared problems, war between countries would become impossible. It would allow economies to flourish, and give the citizens the space and opportunity to develop their potential as human beings.

Since that time in the early 1950s, the European Union has grown tremendously. We started with six Member States; others followed successively. Notably, Greece, Spain and Portugal joined after their respective authoritarian regimes had fallen. In 1989, the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain came down; West and East Germany were peacefully reunited, the EU lent major political and financial support to this. More than 120 million people in the former communist countries in Central Europe were liberated from dictatorships and could rejoin the EU mainstream. This was the end of the Cold War. Last year, Croatia became the 28th Member State of the Union. It was part of an EU strategy to seal peace after the 1990s war in the Western Balkans.

Each time a new country joined the EU, the EU brought a perspective of stability, it helped consolidate nation-to-nation relations into a larger, supporting framework, and it gave a perspective of peace. Of course, it also brought challenges. As the European Union has grown in size and diversity, so have the demands of our abilities to negotiate, cooperate and compromise to find solutions that can satisfy everyone.

We are happy with this challenge. The European Union is the result of voluntary pooling of sovereignty by the Member States, and so we place a very high premium on consensus. This is reflected in the architecture of the Union: one representative for every Member State in the European Commission and in the Council ensures that each Member State is heard equally, while an intricate system of checks

and balances ensures that common ground can be found with as little arm twisting as possible. The same can be said about the European Parliament, where seats are apportioned with a favour towards smaller Member States, which ensures that they will not be trampled underfoot.

The European project is not finished. It never will be! It needs constant maintenance and care. Within our continent we have to continue to nurture and protect peace and stability against the forces that work against it. Against religious intolerance, against ethnic or racial prejudice, and against discrimination in the many forms this can take. Against the risks posed by massive flows of refugees from war-torn countries in the Middle East and Northern-Africa. And against the threats from countries who still propagate military force as a solution to disputes.

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For maintaining peace we cannot be inward-looking. The EU is open to the world, we are affected by it, and we need to reach out to countries and regions outside the EU, even outside Europe. Because of global developments, global security threats affect us all.

Last year the European Union adopted the so-called "comprehensive approach" to external conflicts and crises. The idea is simple: to pull together the EU's wide range of policy tools - diplomatic, security, defence, trade, development and humanitarian – to make the EU's approach to external conflicts and crises more consistent, more effective, and more strategic.

The underlying principle of the approach is that it is impossible to solve disputes through military force. Instead, for us disputes can only be solved through dialogue, through engagement, and through cooperation.

It makes that in foreign policy the EU sometimes looks a bit like a do-gooder. We do not have the sort of military assets that would make us a super power: we do not have a joint EU military command. And there is no European Union army.

Rather, what we bring to the table is soft power. Some say that that is not a great deal. But in fact many of our foreign partners appreciate it, for its non-confrontational character. It helped us mediate a peace agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. It was the reason why the EU was asked to be the negotiator for the Iran nuclear talks, on behalf of the permanent Security Council members.

The comprehensive approach has already been used with success in Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa. There the EU has given political support for the democratic transition in Somalia, helped train the Somali army and set up the "Atalanta" anti-piracy naval mission to tackle Somalia pirates who threaten international shipping lanes.

The EU has also deployed humanitarian and development aid to feed the people. After two decades of chaos and disorder which have spread to whole region, Somalia and the wider Horn of Africa seems to have turned a corner and the "New Deal for Somalia" conference in Brussels in September last year was an important symbol of this change.

There is also a "demand for Europe" here in Asia, where the EU has been a major player in peace and reconciliation processes. The EU co-sponsored the peace treaty agreed by the Philippines government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, putting an end to a struggle that began in the 1960's. In Indonesia, the EU helps implement the peace agreement between the Indonesian government and Aceh, ending a struggle that had claimed 15,000 casualties. The EU has also contributed to reconciliation in East Timor, Nepal, Mindanao and Myanmar.

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As you know, the EU is the world's biggest economy, market and trading bloc. What fewer people know is that Asia has surpassed NAFTA to become the EU's main trading partner, accounting for a third of total trade and this figure continues to grow. China alone is the EU's second biggest trading partner (after the US). ASEAN as a group is in top 5.

The EU's interdependency with Asia goes way beyond economic ties. Our destinies and wellbeing are interlinked. We have 4 of our most important 'strategic partners' in the region and the engagement of the biggest actors in Asia will be essential if we are to tackle global challenges like climate change, piracy, non-proliferation, and freedom of navigation in South China Sea with 50% of world trade in tonnage passing through.

Now, the striking thing in Asia is two parallel truths: Asia is characterised by deep economic integration (in terms of production and supply chains) but also by deep underlying, and indeed growing, political and security tensions. To this one must add the absence of an agreed and strong set of rules, norms and institutions to manage these growing tensions.

We can aid with this. The European Union is ready to share its own experience in regional integration in all the aspects that could be relevant for Asia. While we do not claim to be a "model" ready for photocopying, we are convinced that our experience can serve as an inspiration and as tested practices.

The most important point to stress in this matter is that political will is essential for any multilateral security structure to operate effectively. The European project was by no means an easy accomplishment. It was hard work! Hard work which took many difficult, painstaking negotiations. But, as Jean Monnet, one of the Union's founding fathers, described the philosophy by saying, "*It is better to fight around the negotiating table than on the battlefield*". It also required willingness to compromise, give and take. It involved the need for understanding and tolerance for the other person's point of view and for their worries about problems back home.

It also required giving up the customary ways in which we think about our country, our nation state, as well as our ideas about sovereignty. In fact it meant accepting the fact that, if you want to create a common destiny, you have to share part of your sovereignty with your partners.

Here in Asia, The European Union works very closely with ASEAN, which we see as a sister organisation promoting regional integration in similar ways to ours in Europe. The EU and ASEAN share the same goals for their citizens – peace, stability and prosperity. Both are committed to address issues with a multilateral approach. Political and security cooperation between ASEAN and the EU has been progressing well, and the EU was the first regional organisation to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 2012.

Finally, not everything can be accomplished by governments, politicians, organisations and diplomats. The push for regional cooperation and peace can also come from below, and education can also play an important role in this. Albert Einstein said "*Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding*". Cultural exchanges and studying abroad on exchange semesters allow students to experience the differences in other countries first hand.

In Europe, the Erasmus program promotes higher education exchanges, both within Europe and from other parts of the world. Three million young Europeans have benefitted from this, and it has changed their outlook on the world, on other countries and cultures, for good. It is impossible to prove this scientifically, but I am 100% certain that this is a major contribution to peace.

In 2014, 53% of foreign students worldwide are from Asia, so the foundation for a similar endeavour here is excellent. In my opinion, the Asian countries could set up a similar, large-scale higher education exchange programme as a contribution to mutual understanding and stability across the Asian continent.

Thank you.

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