



Ambassador's Activities

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French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

A French perspective on the future of the European Union

London School of Economics, 13 March 2015

Cher Professor,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to be back with you to talk about Europe, because it's you – students – who will shape Europe's future, and I want to thank Franco-British Connections, which has been kind enough to organize this event. What has struck me since I've been in the United Kingdom is how much Europe is the focus of debate here. This is a crucial moment for Europe, and it's more necessary than ever to talk about Europe.

The European project is one of values, but its aim was initially to give Europe peace, stability and economic prosperity. Those three goals remain, and they're more central than ever to our action and our collective project. More than ever, in the face of new challenges that will be decisive for the future of our continent and its place in the world, Europeans must remain united and find ways collectively to address those three imperatives. Globalization, and the new security challenges we must face, oblige us to do so.

Indeed, in a world where each individual EU member state will count for less in the face of the major emerging countries, we have no choice but to be stronger together, not only so that we can maintain our living standards and social systems but also, and above all, so that we can be in a position to uphold our values and our democracies.

Regarding the EU, we are at a crossroads. Collectively we must face several major challenges, both internal and external: internally, the need to stimulate growth and employment and restore confidence in the European project, and externally, new security challenges on our borders. These challenges must bring us closer together, not move us further apart.

I – Internally,

the European project is admittedly experiencing difficulties and faces major challenges, but these are not insurmountable. I'll mention two: the Euro Area crisis combined with weak growth in Europe, and citizens' decreasing confidence in the European project.

1/ Weak growth in Europe and the Euro Area crisis: the latest economic indicators are encouraging, but policies must be implemented which enable us to support and broaden the economic recovery in Europe. Only sustainable growth and falling unemployment will enable confidence in Europe to be restored. In this respect, the actions taken by the new Commission, and the determination of Jean-Claude Juncker and the ECB, must be welcomed.

But first let's take a step back and look at what we've accomplished. Since 2008, Europe has been managing to tackle crises and take emergency action. Following the emergency of 2008 and 2009, the EU sought to create permanent instruments to guarantee financial stability in Europe. Those instruments are now in place. That in itself is a considerable step forward. It's now time to concentrate on how to stimulate growth in Europe.

- First of all, investment in Europe must be stimulated. Stimulating investment, both private and public, should involve several instruments, first and foremost the Investment Plan for Europe, the so-called "Juncker Plan", worth €315 billion, which we hope will be put in place this summer. The goal is for this plan to benefit all the member states, but principally those which need it most.

- Next, an active monetary policy, conducted with full independence by the ECB, will help stimulate growth in Europe. In this area, the action taken by Mario Draghi as head of the ECB, through his quantitative easing programme, must be welcomed.

- These actions must go hand in hand with continued efforts to restore our public finances to a sound footing, and deeper structural reforms. As it reiterated only this week at the Ecofin Council, France has pledged to honour its commitments and continue its reforms, among which the Macron law is a first step.

- Finally, at the same time we must continue taking full advantage of our common market, by deepening the internal market and also strengthening our competitiveness by improving the business environment in Europe, thus stimulating in particular the activity of SMEs, which create jobs.

- Improving the business climate, making the EU more effective and putting it at the service of businesses. What we've embarked on nationally – particularly through our “Simplification shock” – the EU is currently accomplishing. The European Commission is determined to increase the efficiency of the EU's action and is concentrating on improving its regulation through the Better Regulation initiative. The Commission's Vice-President, Frans Timmermans, who was in London last week, has pledged to improve European regulation to make it better adapted to needs, and that's also a good thing.

- The Euro Area is still, of course, in the recovery phase, but it's much more resilient today than three years ago. Since then the EU has in fact managed to take a whole series of measures to strengthen financial stability, and solidarity mechanisms have been put in place. It's an impressive job which today enables us to cope more effectively in the event of a new crisis.

Today, as I speak, there's no question of a “Grexit”. The Eurogroup, the Commission, the ECB and the IMF are working closely with the Greek authorities to find a long-term, viable solution for everyone in the coming weeks. The Euro Area finance ministers met again on Monday, for the fifth time since 11 February, to discuss the financial assistance plan for Greece. In general terms, in the Euro Area, we must continue to combine fiscal responsibility with the pursuit of structural reforms in our member states, to better prepare ourselves for future challenges.

Finally, there's an urgent need to consider our economic structure and the Euro Area's governance. To this end, France has worked on launching the great project of deeper Economic and Monetary Union, on the basis of two principles: integration and solidarity.

2/ Strengthening Europe's democratic dimension and improving the way it works, to bring it closer to citizens

Renewed growth will be essential for confronting the rise of Euroscepticism in Europe and restoring confidence in the European project. But we must also continue to focus on reforming the EU to make it more effective and democratic, taking full advantage of the instruments put in place by the Lisbon Treaty, like those on strengthening national parliaments. In this regard, we lend our full support to the work embarked on by the

Commission Vice-President, who has focused his action on improving the EU's decision-making process and increasing the involvement of national parliaments.

II – Externally,

the EU is facing many new challenges: a climate challenge with the prospect of the 2015 Paris Climate Conference in December, during which the EU will have a leading role to play to prevent a new failure following that of Copenhagen in 2009; and security challenges on its borders and even within its borders, as shown by the recent attacks in Paris and Copenhagen.

Regarding European diplomacy as such, the European Union has gradually developed a Common Security and Defence Policy which is embodied by the High Representative, previously British (Lady Ashton) and for the past few months Italian (Ms Mogherini).

Allow me to say a few more words on the major international crises of the moment: the Ukraine crisis, relations with Russia and the development of large-scale terrorism in the Middle East and Africa.

1) The crisis in Ukraine has entered a new phase, with the negotiation on 12 February of the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements through the so-called Normandy format – i.e. Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France. Concurrently – and I'd even say in support of the Franco-German initiatives – the EU is playing a very important role thanks to the impact of sanctions. Today, we're all working together to resolve the crisis in Ukraine peacefully. And in addition to the political solution provided for in the Minsk agreement, the EU will have to support the process and the necessary thinking about the future relations with Russia.

On these issues, we must continue to maintain our unity. More than ever, we need a strong, united Europe.

2) Another emblematic issue: the Iranian nuclear programme, on which France and the UK, with Germany and the EU, play a crucial role through the E3+3 process with Iran to secure a comprehensive solution to the crisis.

In the Middle East (I'm thinking of the fight against Daesh or ISIL) the European countries are acting individually depending on whether or not they belong to the coalition coordinated by the United States. However, the EU will have a major role to play when the time comes to rebuild Syria and Iraq, after weapons have stopped sowing terror. This will also be the case in Libya, which constitutes the most serious crisis in its southern neighbourhood.

3) In Africa, Europe has a crucial role to play. The security of Africa is the security of Europe. May I remind you all that Africa is less than 10 miles away from the coasts of Europe. We share a common history and a common destiny with the continent.

Already, the EU has shown its ability to support the continent's peace and stability: in Somalia, thanks to the EU's support – more than 800M€ so far, the African Union operation AMISOM has pushed back the terrorists of Al Shabaab and the country is now rebuilding itself. It is also thanks to the EU that international trade has now returned to normal off the coast of Somalia. The EU naval operation, Atalanta, was the first operation to tackle piracy in the region. The UK is playing an important role in that operation, hosting Atalanta Headquarters. In Central African Republic, the EU mission EUFOR CAR, working alongside French forces, has helped prevent the killings of innocent civilians. EU is the biggest partner of Africa, with more than 5 billion € of aid per year on average.

Europe will have to continue this work. Our futures depend on each other. The success of Africa will be the success of Europe.

III - In this difficult context for Europe, we need, more than ever, to strengthen our unity.

The UK is an essential member state in the EU, crucial for ensuring that Europe is more effective and stronger on the international stage.

It's in the interest of all, including the UK, to ensure that the UK remains inside the EU so that the EU will remain strong and an influential global player. It's not a question of

entering into debates about the EU institutions, but of asking ourselves the fundamental question of the European continent's strategic future. In a globalized world, with the emergence of new powers like China and Brazil, for instance, our countries will carry less weight individually than if we remain a united bloc. This is equally true for trade as it is politically and strategically. I've come back from China, where I was Ambassador; for the Chinese, what counts is the major trading bloc and internal market that is the EU – not each country individually, however important it may be. For our competitors, what matters is Europe as a continent, as whole. And at strategic level, the United States themselves would also like the Europeans to invest more in defence.

So, the time has come for us to pull together and appreciate our strengths. European citizens are actually tired of more than 10 years of institutional debates. What they expect of the EU is for it to be capable of improving their economic situation in practical terms and offering the next generations a future, in a world that will be more complex and most probably harsher for Europeans than the past 60 years. Security is also an essential factor obliging us to remain united: in an increasingly uncertain world, and with the terrorist and extremist threat, we must join forces to defend our shared values. It seems to me that this is what emerged from the Paris attacks in early January: we must guarantee our security and our common future. This largely involves the EU and our operational cooperation throughout European territory.

Amid the scale of the challenges, the UK is a key factor, particularly for France, given the intensity of our bilateral cooperation at every level (economic and cultural), and especially on defence. In the face of the many challenges we have to take up in the coming years, it is essential that the UK remain an active country in the EU, building on the responsibilities we share at the United Nations Security Council.

For these reasons, it seems to me essential that we concentrate on what brings us together and what will increase our weight in the future world, enabling us to prioritize the return to growth and employment.

I'll end with a slogan which, in my opinion, is still relevant, and more so than ever: "We are better together".

Thank you./.