2002 Conference of Ambassadors, Rome, 24/07/2002

Javier Solana, High Representative for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today, and I wish to thank Prime Minister Berlusconi for inviting me to this annual event.

What I intend to do today, is to give you some frank and straightforward views on the role of Europe in the new geo-strategic context. Europe is increasingly encouraged to play a fuller part in international affairs. There is a "demand for Europe". The question then arises: are we - European leaders and governments - able and willing to respond adequately to this demand for a more effective EU role and world affairs?

I must admit that I am often confused at some of the criticism surrounding the current stage in the European construction. It has become fashionable for foreign affairs commentators to criticise Europe's "inaction", or "irrelevance" in world crises, from the Middle East to Afghanistan; from Iraq to the Perejil Island!

But I am not surprised at the criticism coming from nationalist or populist politicians, which have the nation or even their region as the only political horizon. Fighting Europe is a matter of survival for them.

But I am disappointed at European politicians giving way to the temptation of blaming Europe, or Brussels, for problems or decisions which are instead of their own making. It is an easy trick, which unfortunately appears to work most of the time. But at great cost for the EU's image and popularity with its citizens.

And especially I wish to take issue with the perpetual under-rating of current EU progress, done by nostalgics of earlier phases in European integration. Conventional wisdom has it that especially the so-called Kohl-Mitterrand years were something of a Golden Age for European integration.

I have had my humble role in that Europe. We did achieve much, and it is true that much political vision was at play. But, to be honest, the vision did not always materialise in a decisive, or stronger
role for Europe - which seems to be what we are sorely missing today.

Just think back at the way that leadership handled the fall-out of the 1989 "revolution", especially the revival of nationalist feelings throughout Europe, which led to the Balkan wars. Or at the European role in the Middle East at the time of the Madrid conference (where the EU was the host and the paymaster, while the political agenda was run by others). Today, the EU is the main political actor in the Balkans. The region’s entire stability depends on us, and on the European perspective we have offered to its States, and to its people. Agreements are now signed in Europe no longer in Dayton or at Camp David.

In the Middle East the EU has at last gained a seat at the main political table (against all odds) Even in a distant crisis such as Afghanistan, Europe is now playing a crucial role, in spite of all the criticism levelled at its "irrelevance". Let’s not forget that the agreements on which the current Afghan Administration is based were signed in Bonn; that the EU was by far the main donor at the Tokyo conference; that military contributions from 13 EU countries constitute the backbone of the Stabilisation Force (ISAF) in Kabul.

And I am leaving tomorrow, from Rome, for an official trip which would have been unthinkable only a couple of years ago: to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, ending up in Brunei where I will represent the EU at the main Ministerial meeting on security in Asia, alongside the US, Russia, China and Japan - among others.

So much for European irrelevance!

The EU does exist on the international scene. It is already a powerful actor, and a major pole of stability. And it is making progress, irrespective of criticism by those who prefer to look in the rear-mirror, rather than at the reality of today.