

*Lecture by YVES LETERME, Prime Minister of Belgium*

*Seoul National University (Investiture Ceremony for his doctorate honoris causa)*

*6 April 2010*

Mr. President  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am profoundly honored by the title of doctor honoris causa you have bestowed on me. This title is not only an honor for which I am deeply grateful. It will also be an incentive for me to work for closer relations between Belgium and the Republic of Korea, and between the European Union and the ROK. It is to both our advantage to know each other better and to work more closely together.

Before going on to the necessity of new partnerships between Europe and Asia, I'd like to start with some words about Belgium, the European Union, and the importance of your country.

Belgians and South-Koreans do not know each other nearly well enough, and so I am very well aware that my country is not a household word in yours. But we share very important history. We stood side by side, shoulder to shoulder, during the harsh Korean war of 1950-1953. This war was not only defining for your country, it was essential for all of us who oppose totalitarianism and tyranny. The success of South-Korea, a thriving, democratic country, is a conclusive proof that the war, for which you paid so heavy a price, was worth fighting. Belgium is proud to have been part of it under the UN flag

Like the Republic of Korea, Belgium is surrounded by larger and mightier neighbors. Like you, it has suffered war and occupation without having provoked them. Like you, it has rebuilt itself after those wars and become one of the most prosperous countries of this world.

We have other things in common. If the possession of rich natural resources was a condition for national wealth, South-Korea and Belgium would both be poor. The reality is very different. South-Korea ranks 15th worldwide in Gross Domestic Product. Belgium, a country of 10.5 million people, ranks 73th in terms of population. But it ranks fourteenth in the world in terms of Gross National Product per capita, twentieth in GNP in absolute figures, and twelfth in value of its exports. It is not a mean achievement.

Like you, we owe this position to investment in the most precious asset any country has, its people. We owe it to investment in education, in learning, in innovation. It is the deep conviction of my government that, especially in these difficult times, it cannot be emphasised enough that for companies small and large, the members of their work force are not a cost, but an asset. And that

investment in their employees' life long learning is investment in future success.

This being said, Belgium does not owe its prosperity only to itself. It owes it also, to quote from an old Beatles' song, to 'a little help from our friends'. Or rather, I should say, to a lot of help from our friends.

The generous American Marshall help after World War II brought us back to our feet much faster than if we had had to do it all on our own. And NATO, the alliance between North-America and Europe, gave us a shield which allowed us to keep defense expenditure relatively low, and to redistribute our new wealth among our citizens. The trans-Atlantic solidarity remains a cornerstone of our foreign policy.

Complementary with that, there is the process of European integration, which is at the very core of Belgium's foreign policy. From the modest beginnings of the European Community of Coal and Steel to the current European Union of 27 members, Belgium has been an ardent supporter and facilitator of the European integration process.

I know that this process is not always very clear and comprehensible to the outside world. But then, this European Union is an unprecedented adventure, a totally new form of integration in which sovereign, democratic countries, of their own free will, agree to exercise a large part of their sovereignty in common.

The integration started with the economy. Belgium, one of the six founding members, and its partners owe a considerable part of their prosperity to the creation of the Common Market. Because of those beginnings, the economic integration is the most advanced part. In the negotiations on world trade, the so called Doha Round, the Union really speaks not only with one voice but by one mouth, that of the Trade Commissioner of the European Union. I am glad to say that this is now a compatriot, former Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht.

The industrial and environmental standards the Union sets have become normative for a large part of the world as the Union, with half a billion inhabitants, is the largest trade entity in the world.

The single currency, the euro, brought sixteen of the EU countries in even closer integration. This single currency helped us significantly to weather the economic crisis without too much damage to our economic and social fabric.

I am, of course, familiar with the criticism levelled at the European Union and at many of its member states, criticism we also hear in Asia. We are, it is said, overregulated. Our systems of social protection and our bureaucracies eat up too large a part of our gross national product. Our social protection tends to smother personal initiative and risk taking, audacious entrepreneurship and bold

R&D work. Our economic growth is sluggish, compared to other parts of the world.

But let us look at the other side of the medal. We may not have known double digit yearly economic growth. But growth is not enough; one still has to see to a fair distribution of the new wealth amongst the citizens, so as not to endanger social harmony. In Western Europe we have grown more slowly, but we started from a higher base, and we did it in a context of political stability and social harmony. In Europe, we call this model of socially and ecologically responsible free enterprise “the Rhineland model”. I am extremely attached to it, and I explained why in the book I wrote on it.

In the non economic field, the Lisbon Treaty, which came into effect this year, now strengthens the political coherence of the Union. It gave the council of the heads of state and governments a permanent chairman, my predecessor as Belgian Prime Minister, and fellow christian-democrat Herman Van Rompuy. This again demonstrates how closely Belgium is involved in the European integration process.

I will not try and tell you that the division of competences within the Union has now become crystal clear. We are still in the process of adaptation to the new Treaty.

This is quite a normal process. As I said, the European Union is a totally new form of cooperation and integration.

The director-general of the World Trade Organisation, Pascal Lamy, a former – and brilliant – EU Commissioner described it in a rather snappy way at the recent Brussels Forum, the so called ‘political Davos’ which takes place yearly in Brussels.

He said that political power, like mass, comes at three levels: solid, liquid and gaseous. The national level is solid, the European liquid, the international gaseous.

He is quite right. The basis of political power is still vested in the national, sovereign states. Their governments must show the political will and give the impetus to work together for the common good. Without this élan, nothing gets done and the international institutions remain indeed ‘gaseous’.

What Pascal Lamy called the ‘liquidity’ of the European level of power is not an indication of impotence. I find this image quite apt. The European power level is liquid as a river is. Because it is in continual flow, it can seem difficult to get a grasp on it. But a river with so many tributaries as the European Union has, is still a mighty force.

The Union is indeed a real diplomatic and political force, capable of building strong partnerships in the global world.

The European integration has brought another precious gift, the most precious one of all. In Europe, it has become almost old hat to speak about the peace we now have enjoyed for generations. The generations who have never known war take it for granted.

They think it normal that we can open the windows of our national home and see only friendly neighbors, whichever way we look.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I know I do not have to convince this audience that this kind of almost total security is to be treasured, and not taken for granted.

This brings me to South-Korea. In four decades, your country has achieved an incredible record of growth and global integration to become a high-tech industrialized economy. After the devastation of a war in which two million people were killed, the GDP per capita was comparable with levels in the poorer countries of Africa and Asia.

In 2004, South Korea joined the trillion dollar club of world economies. This was done by hard work and, certainly in the early stages, a very focused government policy which promoted the import of raw materials and technology over consumer goods, and encouraged savings and investment over consumption. This policy however did not fall into the trap of a protectionism which would have cut the domestic production from competition with the outside world. Because of this openness, South-Korea achieved an excellence which is not only technological. At our prestigious yearly Queen Elisabeth musical competition for instance, the talent of your many young artists has impressed and delighted the audiences.

The recognition South-Korea enjoys is also reflected by the fact that your country will host the G20 summit in the second half of this year. This informal grouping of the strongest economies and the emerging economies, has helped to absorb the shocks of the financial and economic crisis. I would say that it has delivered on the defensive, but not – yet - on the offensive. It has managed discipline and has prevented the return to the kind of protectionism which in the nineteen thirties turned a recession into a terrible depression. That is no mean achievement. But the next stage has to be a more active phase of initiating change to put into practice the lessons learned from the crisis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The G-20 is a reflection of the new partnerships in this changing world, it is a flexible response to new challenges. Although we do live in a globalised world, the earth has not become flat. Power still rests with national governments and it is to their governments that people look for protection against violence and insecurity, against poverty and deprivation.

The G20 is one example where governments come together in new forums to work for the common good. The absorption of the G8 by the G20 reflects the importance of Asia.

The European countries and the European Union have to find more ways to connect with the countries of Asia, because without the cooperation of Asia, there can be no socially and ecologically sustainable growth.

**As the country which will hold the rotating EU presidency, Belgium will have the honor of hosting the ASEM summit this fall.**

**The Asia-Europe Meeting is a vital forum for dialogue between Europe and Asia. It is the main multilateral channel for communication and dialogue between Asia and Europe since 1996, and involves virtually the whole of Asia and Europe. The 45 ASEM partners represent half of the world's GDP, almost 60% of the world's population and 60% of global trade.**

**These are eloquent figures which demonstrate the necessity for a EU-Asia partnership. It is true that there is a kind of imbalance because there is no equivalent of the European Union in Asia. But we can overcome this by realism and creativity.**

One of our priorities should be to increase mutual investment. Many Asian countries would like a larger European presence. European countries, and Belgium in particular, are certainly interested in investment from this vibrant part of the world. We have to think about efficient mechanisms to bring this about.

We also have everything to gain in working together to counter trade protectionism, and to further promote trade development.

One word of warning: for the action of specific groupings like the G20 or others new partnerships to be effective, they have to be networked into inclusive organisations that enjoy international legitimacy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is another area where I see room for a new partnership, with South-Korea and Asian nations. South-Korea is much more than a country which has demonstrated its economic and artistic excellence and which, I may add, was an excellent host to major sporting events as the Summer Olympics and the Football World Cup.

South-Korea is very important because it is one of the countries which have shown that Asians can

find their own way to modernity and excellence and still remain Asians, that they can find their own way to democracy without breaking with their culture and traditions. This is extremely important in a time when modernity and democracy are too often described as purely so called western values, or are even reviled as a kind of new imperialism.

Some people in the West, when referring to the link between North-America and Europe, prefer not to talk of 'our common values' any more. They think this smacks of the Cold War, when we referred to our values to resist communist totalitarianism.

But the defense of human dignity is not an act of aggression against any country. It is a gesture of solidarity to people all over the world, under different repressive regimes, who aspire to responsible government, to accountability, to the rule of law, to human rights. Those are the aspiration and birthright of all human beings.

I'd like to add that these are not just moral values; they are a matter of enlightened self interest. South-Korea is the living proof of the superiority of those values over totalitarianism. When the war ended, South-Korea was totally impoverished and North-Korea was by far the richest part of the Korean peninsula. Now there is no comparison in their respective positions.

We could and should think of a new form of cooperation between Europe and the countries in Asia which anchor a growing movement toward open government, accountability and human rights. That would at the same moment be an action for peace, because open government and predictability are factors of stability and peace.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have only given some of the reasons why South-Korea is important to us, as a thriving economy, and as a growing world player. I should also have spoken of your rich culture, and of the beauties of the land of the morning calm, but my time is limited.

I could only give you a brief overview of the new scope for cooperation between our countries, and between Asia and Europe.

But I hope I have convinced you that the scope is there. I consider the honor of the distinction given to me by this distinguished university as an encouragement to work hard for closer cooperation between our countries. And to work within the European Union, as the future holder of the EU presidency and **host of ASEM 8**, for closer cooperation between our continents which have so much to offer to each other.

With this promise, I thank you for your attention.