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Thalassa Summit: Closing statement

On 19 April, the Belgian and Dutch governments held a joint "Thalassa Summit" in Ghent. We took stock of our intense collaboration and discussed how we will further strengthen our close relationship in the coming years.

This fourth Thalassa Summit comes at a time when we are at a turning point in Europe. Once again, we must vigorously defend our societal model. This requires strong cooperation among our countries, within Europe and beyond.

Belgium and the Netherlands cherish the same values and principles. We know how to find each other again and again, in the Benelux, within the European Union, in NATO, and in the United Nations. To successfully defend our freedom and democracy, promote human rights and the rule of law, and ensure our security and international order, we must cooperate internationally and multilaterally.

As these values have come under attack, we are more determined than ever to defend and propagate them with vigour and conviction. We support the Ukrainian people and their democratically elected leaders in their struggle for a free society. Belgium and the Netherlands want to play an active role in meeting this unprecedented geopolitical challenge.

Belgium and the Netherlands have open and resilient economies, focused on prosperity and wellbeing for all. As neighbouring countries with a shared history and common language, Belgium and the Netherlands maintain intense relations. Our close historical, socio-economic and cultural ties are strong assets. Our citizens and businesses have parallel interests, in terms of security, and economic and social resilience. As best neighbours, we collaborate across our borders in many areas. We are therefore committed to removing border barriers and preventing new ones.

We share a closely intertwined and highly developed infrastructure with key hubs for energy, finance, transportation and digital communications. We strive, from our position on the Scheldt-Meuse-Rhine Delta, to further develop our infrastructure and secure our supply lines.

We both enjoy the benefits of Europe's free movement of people, goods, capital and services. We are key players in international trade and investment. Innovation and highly skilled expertise are the engines of our progress. We are among the world's top exporting countries.

Safety and resilience

In light of Brexit in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is clear that more intense international cooperation is necessary. Not only for economic reasons, but also to ensure security and prosperity in Europe. In the years to come, we will intensify our cooperation to increase our economic resilience, build a strong NATO and a robust European Union. At the same time, we are taking action to affirm our democratic model and maintain our open trade relations.

We are therefore stepping up our common efforts to enhance our internal and external security. We will do this bilaterally, within Europe and with our allies within NATO. We are seeking greater cooperation in the areas of economic and knowledge security, and are continuing our efforts to guarantee fundamental rights

and freedoms, ensure social protection, and safeguard our environment and climate. The EU, among other international forums, remains the preferred framework. It goes without saying that the EU can only successfully fulfil this role if all member states respect the fundamental principles of our Union, in particular the rule of law and the functioning of the internal market.

It is crucial for the EU to speak with a strong voice in international forums, especially the UN. Belgian-Dutch consultation, preferably in the Benelux context, contributes to a stronger voice in EU decision-making and gives us the opportunity to continue to deliver on our multilateral commitment.

Homeland Security

The fight against organized crime is an absolute priority, especially the fight against drug trafficking. To combat drug and drug-related crimes, we are building on our political, strategic and operational cooperation. In doing so, we are adopting a multidisciplinary approach with a focus on prevention, administrative enforcement, detection and sentencing, and addressing criminal assets. This will take place as much as possible within existing collaborative structures and instruments. We are also learning from the fight against organized crime elsewhere in Europe and strengthening cooperation with source and transit countries of drugs and related crimes outside Europe, such as in Latin America. We are actively striving to make our logistical hubs more resilient to malpractice.

Our judicial and police cooperation is intense. The new Benelux Treaty for police cooperation will come into force in 2022. The implementation agreements of the Convention will give a strong boost to our police information exchange.

In both our countries, terrorism and violent radicalism are a threat and a challenge.

In both of our countries, foreign funding of anti-democratic tendencies pose a threat and a challenge. There are currently individuals who are radicalizing or highly radicalized and can pose a threat to our security and society. Unwanted foreign funding allows anti-democratic ideas to gain a foothold. Our countries commit to countering unwanted foreign funding and propaganda. We are exploring the possibility of establishing a joint imam training programme at the EU-level. We remain in close and constant consultation on all forms of extremism.

A plurality of views and critical debates gives oxygen to our democracy. However, a small radical group can undermine democracy and society and disrupt the conduct of free and open elections by spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories, and anti-public authorities or anti-democratic sentiments. At the EU level, we are working together to tackle disinformation and make European democracy more resilient, including through the implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan.

Protection and external security

We consider it very important that people fleeing Ukraine because of the Russian invasion find a safe haven. The EU and its member states must respond in solidarity to the consequences of Russian aggression, and to supporting Ukraine's neighbouring countries. Belgium and the Netherlands consider it essential that Ukrainian refugees be received in the best possible way.

The current situation once again underlines the importance of an effective and humane European asylum and migration policy. We therefore want to speed up negotiations on the Asylum and Migration Pact to

control migration flows and to be able to relieve member states. For this to happen, solidarity among member states in the reception of asylum seekers must go hand in hand with responsibility by each of the member states. To strike the right balance, in addition to progress on screening and registration, improvement in the functioning of the Dublin Regulation is essential.

Our countries want more control over migration. We are committed to strengthening and improving legal migration on the one hand, and to reducing irregular migration on the other. That is why we want to make the Schengen area more secure by strengthening its external borders, better applying European rules and preventing secondary migration flows. We are also joining forces to strengthen migration cooperation with countries of origin and transit and to address the root causes of irregular migration. We will continue to make concerted efforts to address COVID-19 restrictions on transfers and returns to other EU member states and countries of origin.

We support the Benelux initiative on Asylum Migration & Radicalism (AMR) in which member states exchange information on foreign nationals who may pose a threat to national security.

Our countries have decided to strengthen cooperation in crisis management. Consular services to citizens – in normal times as well as in times of crisis – is an area of cooperation par excellence. We assist each other, in evacuations or repatriations, with mutual information and operational support, as was the case during the evacuation operations from Afghanistan or during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By learning lessons from these crises, we aim to create a better European consular approach for the safety and comfort of our citizens. That is why, after the operations in Afghanistan, we launched together with Luxembourg, Finland and Poland an initiative for better European consular cooperation in crisis situations. Our countries will strengthen their cooperation in the field of crisis management and will soon explore various options for continuing the exchange of expertise in a practical and pragmatic manner, particularly on the security of diplomatic missions, the exchange of consular teams, and the sharing of information and expertise related to security.

Our two Foreign Affairs administrations have developed a successful programme for the exchange of diplomatic officers, which we will continue. This is the case whenever one of our countries is on the Security Council. In the near future, the Netherlands will second a diplomat to the Belgian Department of Sanctions Policy, with a view to strengthening EU policy. Conversely, a Belgian diplomat will be seconded to the Dutch Directorate for Europe.

Current geopolitical tensions and the ongoing war on European soil are forcing us to face joint threats faster and more vigorously. We are therefore deepening our defence cooperation. Already today we have close military ties through our integrated navies, the joint surveillance of the Benelux airspace and the cooperation between our special forces. New frigates and mine countermeasures vessels are being developed and procured together, further deepening existing cooperation. This also applies to the joint procurement of new reconnaissance drones. In the future, we will work closely together to develop and operationalize new capabilities such as the F-35 or unmanned systems.

Sustained defence cooperation between our countries is a stepping-stone to more European defence cooperation. The new EU Strategic Compass also gives this an important impetus to intensify military cooperation as European countries. Now this must be implemented with urgency. This includes strengthening military missions, more joint projects to develop European capabilities, and strengthening resilience to cyber and hybrid threats. Both our countries are also open to expanding their cooperation on mine action and frigates to other European countries. NATO and the EU are not opposites, but should reinforce each other in the best possible way.

The increase and diversity of threats and the growing instability in our neighbourhood also require greater cooperation in foreign operations. Belgium and the Netherlands already work closely together operationally, including joint contributions with Germany and Norway to the NATO Response Force and Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania, the Sahel, and NATO maritime squadrons. In addition, the Netherlands and Belgium worked very closely together and supported each other in Iraq and Jordan in the fight against ISIS. Belgium and the Netherlands are looking at where else they can act together in an EU, NATO or UN framework or bilaterally.

We also share experiences and ideas for readying our armed forces to meet new challenges, such as a better approach to retention and recruitment. Additionally, we will share information more intensively around hybrid threats, cyber threats, military mobility and green defence. In the case of cyber threats, coalition collaboration remains crucial in formulating diplomatic responses, strengthening resilience and deterring cyber-attacks. Such cooperation also takes place diplomatically.

At the same time, we have joined forces to combat cyber and other threats against the vital infrastructure in the North Sea and in our ports and port facilities. We are also working together to continue to ensure safe and secure shipping in the world's busiest shipping zone and enforce respect for the environment in existing offshore zones.

Strengthened Resilience

Our countries are absolute champions in international trade. This also makes us especially vulnerable to disruptions. That is why we are making a concerted effort to increase our economic and knowledge resilience.

This starts with laying the groundwork for our economic growth, social cohesion and competitiveness, and accelerating the green and digital transitions. A strong single market requires robust European competition and state aid rules that ensure fair competition and a level playing field. We need to prevent member states from competing with each other for state aid, creating a subsidy race. Instruments such as the Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI) should focus on highly innovative technologies and addressing market failures.

A resilient economy also requires that we, as Europe, strengthen our geo-economic position and reduce the risks of unwanted strategic dependencies, while ensuring the openness of our economies. To achieve a system of open strategic autonomy and remain a technological leader, we must continue to invest in highly innovative and sustainable technologies and to cooperate internationally.

Our countries will actively work together to strengthen European leadership in advanced semiconductors within the global value chains, based on our shared know-how and reputation. We are working together so that our companies and research institutions can take a leading role in the implementation of the EU Chips Act and in the IPCEI for microelectronics. Our countries are also actively involved in other IPCEIs around hydrogen, cloud infrastructure and services, and health.

We also intend to strengthen our leadership with the construction of the Einstein Telescope, an advanced observatory for gravitational waves. Our border region with Germany provides the right geological environment and ecosystem for this, with our knowledge institutions and high-tech companies. We will work closely together, and, if decisions on participation and funding are positive, we will take the necessary steps at national, regional and all relevant levels, to jointly prepare a strong and attractive

candidacy during 2023-2024.

We are aiming to consolidate our world leadership in the production of medical radioisotopes by tackling the problem at the European level. We want to commit to sufficient production capacity and availability of medical radioisotope treatments in the EU. Furthermore, we want to work together to find a solution to highly radioactive waste at the European level and thus contribute to the European support for nuclear applications, including the MYRRHA project. We foresee an exchange of practical applications around the latest radio technology 5G so that innovative solutions can support our countries' economies.

Belgium and the Netherlands are very open economies so a well-regulated international trading system with a level playing field is critical. This is essential to continue to guarantee global market access for our companies, even in an era when third countries are once again increasingly sealing off their markets. A level playing field also requires that we address increasingly harsh and often unfair competition. The new regulation on the International Procurement Instrument is also an important step for our countries. Further, we are implementing stronger screening of foreign investment, to ensure that we do not become too dependent on or too influenced by authoritarian countries.

Territorial supply restrictions are part of unfair trade practices with competitive disadvantages and negative effects on prices and supply for consumers. We are asking the European Commission to take the necessary measures in this regard.

EU trade agreements contribute to a level playing field and diversification of value chains. They must respect our social, sustainable and societal standards. We are therefore working closely together to give proper attention to these essential conditions when concluding European trade and investment treaties. Together, we are championing ambitious EU legislation on due diligence. This is important if the objectives of the European Green Deal are to be fully realized. This legislation should permanently eliminate degrading working conditions, and counteract violations of labour and human rights as well as environmental and climate damage in international value chains. A coherent European approach, which includes EU legislation and flanking measures, promotes a level playing field and leads to more impact in producing countries.

Rising inflation threatens our prosperity and must be curbed. Our state finances need to be made more resilient to external shocks, as COVID-19 and the Ukraine crisis have yet again demonstrated. Within the EU, we are therefore advocating for effective criteria to achieve structurally sound and structurally resilient public finances and to ensure the necessary public investment. Further completion of the banking union and the capital markets union should allow our citizens and businesses to take full advantage of Europe's wide and deep financing opportunities, while ensuring our financial stability.

In the digital transition, our cooperation internationally, EU-wide but also bilaterally is essential. Digitization leads to great opportunities for our society and economy, for example through a strong European digital market, high-performance digital infrastructure and ambitious cooperation in technological innovation. But it also brings challenges and can lead to a digital divide, power imbalances, an excessive carbon footprint and growing inequality in our society. As governments, we must ensure that we encourage and embrace the opportunities of the digital transition, in a way that is consistent with our values of security and democracy, and the principles of the rule of law and self-determination. This is how we foster a digital economy that is open, fair and secure, where businesses can innovate well, consumers are well protected and that contributes to sustainable economic growth. A robust, collaborative approach to disinformation is of great importance, particularly in light of current developments such as the Ukraine crisis and the corona pandemic.

In terms of digitalization, the Netherlands and Belgium are joining forces with other leading European countries in a coalition of the willing. We are working together to create a digital leader group to achieve Europe's digital ambition. One of the current proposals concerns the new eIDAS regulation. The Netherlands and Belgium support this important proposal, with which we take a good step towards a European digital cooperation. In doing so, we want the trust of our citizens to be paramount when it comes to a digital identity. Transparency, control over one's own data and predictability of the execution of digital identity are crucial for us.

Sustainability

The recent IPCC and IPBES reports remind us of the urgency of the climate and biodiversity crisis. We must limit global warming in line with the Paris Agreement to aim for no more than 1.5°C of warming. The goal should be to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% at the European Union level (vs. 1990) and be climate neutral by 2050. The geopolitical context reinforces the importance of drastically reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, while keeping in mind what other dependencies this may create.

We therefore take responsibility and will arrive at quick, effective and responsible solutions. As knowledge-intensive and high-tech regions, our countries occupy a strong position in the field of energy transition and there are opportunities to be leaders in Europe in this regard. As the industrial and logistics gateway to Europe, the ports of the Scheldt-Meuse delta are a powerful lever for achieving the sustainability transformation. Together, we want to lead the way towards a sustainable and equitable transition, leaving no one behind and ensuring the affordability of energy for our families and businesses.

In addition, we are committed to a more sustainable future for prosperity and wellbeing, both in our own countries and elsewhere in the world. Organizing trade missions, such as the planned Dutch mission on circularity in May 2022, can make an important contribution to this.

Better and sustainable mobility

Within the EU, the Netherlands and Belgium often work together in the pursuit of ambitious legislation on sustainable mobility, such as CO2 standards for cars and vans, and the realization of alternative refuelling and charging infrastructure in the EU. In the Benelux and bilaterally, knowledge is exchanged on policies for zero emission vehicles and infrastructure for alternative fuels. There is also good Benelux and bilateral cooperation around cycling policy. For example, the Benelux countries and North Rhine-Westphalia are jointly developing a cross-border roadmap to encourage cycling.

The ports of the Scheldt-Meuse delta are the main gateway for our industrial and logistics hinterland and must remain so in the future. Therefore, our countries are intensifying consultations, together with North Rhine-Westphalia and the German federal government, on future cross-border infrastructure, including the 3RX project. We will complete the work of the two working groups involved, one specifically on the 3RX route and one as part of a broader mobility approach, by early 2023 so that the groundwork can be laid for a political decision. Thus, we will try to facilitate the connections of our delta ports and remove the missing links with the rest of Europe.

On the road to energy independence

Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes it crystal clear how important it is that we reduce our energy dependence on Russia as quickly as possible, and irreversibly. We need to commit to the accelerated

diversification of oil and gas suppliers, and speed up the energy transition by raising our ambitions in the development of offshore wind farms, green hydrogen, etc. We will also explicitly work on this together in the EU context.

Securing gas supplies for the next winter and high energy prices are not only prompting the search for new suppliers but making it clear that renewable energy needs to be rolled out more quickly. Integrating more renewable energy into the energy mix and pricing is necessary to reduce fossil fuel use. Energy efficiency of buildings and electrification of energy demand in buildings and transportation are important levers in this regard.

A major concern for the progress of the energy transition is the availability of crucial raw materials. In that light, we will work together to map commodity flows from both countries to the Union. Circular economy processes, including those for raw materials required for renewable energy technologies, should support this.

Environment and climate

To meet the climate goals, we will accelerate the transition of our economies. The devastating floods in our countries last summer once again demonstrated the need for this. We will strengthen our mutual cooperation on climate adaptation, particularly with regard to the insurance gap, and integrate the impact of climate change into our macro-fiscal policies. We are also determined to fully implement the EU Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Strategy to be climate resilient by 2050 at the latest.

To provide our businesses, investors, citizens and policymakers at all levels with policy certainty as soon as possible, and to keep the 1.5°C within reach, we seek the early adoption of an ambitious and balanced "Fit for 55" package that fully implements the European Climate Law.

Environmental crime threatens the quality of life in both our countries in various ways and often has cross-border implications. With the elaboration of the European Green Deal, new opportunities for criminals will arise. It is therefore of great importance that both our national investigative agencies and the regulators in our ports detect and combat this crime in close coordination, in order to avoid a waterbed effect in, for example, the illegal trade and transport of waste, oil flows and protected timber species.

Belgium and the Netherlands have set aside funds to finance the transition, and to work on making public and private investments more sustainable and on long-term international climate finance beyond 2025. Moreover, the transformation of our economies from a linear to a circular, climate-neutral model will allow us to save financial resources, achieve greater efficiency in the use of energy and other resources, create jobs, and reduce the impact of production and consumption on the environment. We will promote e-commerce that is sustainable, both environmentally and socially.

We will also explore ways to collaborate on carbon capture and storage (CCS) and will work with our relevant authorities to develop related terms and procedures.

In addition, we agree to stay in close contact about our national plans for the roll out of hydrogen infrastructure. In doing so, we will also explore the possibility of cross-border infrastructure.

We will exchange knowledge and experience around the energy transition in making the built environment sustainable. Our countries have a similar starting point and can thus learn from each other.

We will support ambitious measures against imported timber from deforestation. Our countries have signed the "Amsterdam Declaration" partnership. We will also advocate for a ban on exports of most dangerous chemicals that are banned within the EU.

The principle of "One World, One Health" is central to our actions, recognizing the crucial link between human, animal and environmental health and integrating it into various policy areas. Multiple sectors, disciplines and communities must work together at different levels of society to promote wellbeing and address threats to health and ecosystems, while the collective needs in terms of clean water, energy and air, safe and nutritious food, and combating climate change must also be met. Our policies should aim to protect and restore the planet's limits to ensure a healthy and liveable planet, for now and for generations to come.

We are committed to reducing harmful substances in our rivers, such as PFAS, to a level where there are no harmful effects on health and ecosystems. This is in line with the European Zero Pollution Ambition, in particular the Chemical Strategy for Sustainability and its associated action plan.

Towards more sustainable global value chains

As like-minded countries, Belgium and the Netherlands can further strengthen cooperation on common focal points such as gender equality, human rights, social protection, the fight against social fraud, climate, security and global health issues. We do this in areas such as pandemic preparedness and the local production of vaccines in Africa. We are also committed to coordinating our positions as closely as possible within international forums and multilateral institutions.

In addition, we are resolutely committed to sustainable trade and value chains, with respect for labour and human rights, climate and environment, free from deforestation, forced and/or child labour, and with a living wage or income. It is of global importance to promote sustainable international cooperation in our partner countries. Developing countries must be supported in their demand to stop being the object of resource grabbing, so that they can realize their full development potential for the benefit of their citizens.

Inequality in global trade chains and the resilience of global food systems is a pressing issue. For example, the wages of workers and the incomes of small farmers who make our daily consumption of such items as chocolate, clothing, coffee, tropical fruits and flowers possible are regularly far below the living wage or income. More and more governments, companies, investors and NGOs are embracing living wages and incomes as the reference point to work towards. As governments of consuming countries, our countries share this ambition, and we will also work with producing countries through our diplomatic engagement and reach joint agreements.

Our countries will act together leading up to the Living Wage Summit in Brussels in October 2022. Ahead of COP27 in November 2022, we are intensifying our consultations on the sustainable and profound transformation of global food systems. We will also support cooperation between the different national platforms for sustainable cocoa and small producers in the framework of European initiatives. The organization of the World Cocoa Conference in Belgium in 2024 will provide a special opportunity to promote our cooperation on sustainable cocoa, again with special attention for living incomes.

Cross-border cooperation

The pulse of our cooperation is found in our border region where there is proximity between neighbours,

colleagues, business partners, friends and family on both sides of the border. As we are determined to promote these close relationships, we will take further steps to eliminate and avoid border barriers, based on facts and needs on the ground. Together we will continue to put the impact on border regions on the European agenda. We defend their special position in European free movement, also in times of crisis and pandemic. The follow-up to our Benelux-Baltics paper on the introduction of a "border test" into European decision-making is the tool of choice.

Taxation

A new double-taxation treaty will provide additional impetus to working across the border and more certainty for employers and employees. Both governments are pleased to note that negotiations on the amendment of the bilateral tax treaty are progressing well and expect that political agreement will be reached on it this year.

Disaster Relief

We will consider ways to update the 14 November 1984 Convention on Mutual Assistance in Responding to Disasters and Accidents. Operationally, we will continue and strengthen our crisis cooperation, which has proved valuable on several occasions, including during the floods in the summer of 2021.

Equal Opportunities

In addition to combating sexually transgressive behaviour, both of our countries are pioneers in protecting and promoting equal opportunities for the LGBT+ community. We will continue to set an example and work for equal opportunities in society for all. Given our shared values but also similar problems, both countries will increase cooperation in the fight against sexually transgressive behaviour, support a European policy against sexual violence, share good practices and advocate for all members of the LGBT+ community. We want to strengthen the empowerment of women and the LGBT+ community, including by addressing unequal gender relations and stereotypical gender views.

Sustainable passenger transport

We are making a stronger commitment to more cross-border accessibility and sustainable mobility. We will continue to improve the (short) cross-border transport of goods between our two countries. Improvements are also being sought in cross-border passenger transport such as the Antwerp-Rosendaal, Antwerp-Breda, Antwerp-Hamont-Weert and the Liège-Maastricht-Aachen links. To confirm our desire to work together on this, Belgium and the Netherlands today revised the 2016 mutual agreements on short, cross-border rail connections.

Alexander De Croo, Prime Minister
Rue de la Loi 16
1000 Brussels
Belgium
+32 2 501 02 11
<https://premier.be>
contact@premier.be