

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for welcoming me here today.

While I am happy to be here, I wish I could have joined you against a different backdrop.

On the one hand, it is sad that we are here for the third year in a row and the Russian aggression is still continuing.

On the other hand, Putin thought he could take over Ukraine in three days.

After three years, Ukraine is still holding the line.

And if Russia is able to progress at the current speed, it will take more than three hundred years to take over Ukraine.

Of course, this is due to the strength, the fighting spirit and the perseverance of the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian people.

Last week I visited the EUMAM training mission in Germany, where Ukrainian soldiers are being trained.

It was truly impressive to talk to some of these young men.

Even when the situation at the front line is so hard, and they know exactly where they will go to, they still decide to join the military and fight for their country.

The intensity in which they are doing their training, the speed in which they master new weapon systems, is remarkable.

Take for example the F16's. Ukrainian pilots learned to fly them in slightly more than a year, while this would take multiple years in a normal training program.

But of course, Ukrainian now more than anyone else what they are fighting for.

I know many of you here in this room have visited Ukraine over the last three years.

Every time I went there, I have seen the devastation with my own eyes;

Entire apartment blocks reduced to rubble, families ripped apart, children attending school in bunkers, electricity outages, and air alarms all day.

And when you speak to Ukrainians, you sense grief, you sense exhaustion.

But you also see the resilience, the strength to rebuild, and the spirit to keep fighting.

All these sacrifices should never be in vain.

And certainly, they must never be forgotten.

Of course, now all the talk is about negotiations, about what type of compromises Ukraine should make, people tend to forget the sacrifices Ukraine has made and is making every time.

This should never be forgotten.

After three years of war, it is also more important than ever to keep the facts straight.

We know that disinformation is a key element of Putin's and Russia's strategy.

That's why we need to stress and reemphasize the facts over and over again.

- Russia is the aggressor, Ukraine has been illegally invaded and attacked for no reason

- Putin is a dictator, Zelensky is a democratically elected president

- Russia commits war crimes, Ukraine has every right to defend itself.

Now that we have the facts straight, let's discuss the 4 things we should do from a Defence perspective.

1) First, we need to continue our support to Ukraine, and speed up and scale up where we can.

- Over the last year we have worked hard to deliver F16's.
We do not only deliver the fighter jets, but we deliver the full package.
That means also spare parts, ammunition and training to both pilots and engineers.
For example, we helped to set up a training center for this in Rumania.
In order to keep the F16's operable, we need to continue this support.
This does not only help Ukraine to protect their skies, but also to make the transition to a modern military and to NATO standards.

- After the patriots and F16's, we asked ourselves how we can make the most difference.
We see that drones are making a true difference, both on the battle field and in terms of long range strike capabilities.
In the Netherlands we have various entrepreneurs and companies which have deep knowledge and expertise on drones, or key parts of drones.
That's why we decided to create an action plan on drones for Ukraine, with a total budget of 400 million.
Within this action plan, we set up specific drones projects, quite often a joint venture or cooperation between a Dutch and Ukrainian company.
These ways of cooperation cut both ways.
It provides the most modern drones to Ukraine, which can immediately be used on the battle field.
It provided Dutch entrepreneurs with the latest insights and lessons learned from the battle field, which helps to further innovate and develop drones.
In this way, this helps to further develop the Dutch ecosystem for drones.

Apart from F16's and drones, we keep supporting Ukraine in every possible way.
Armed vehicles, tanks, howitzers, ammunition, spare parts, personal equipment, medical goods: basically everything Ukraine needs.

Let me share my simple 1-2-3 rule.
So far, we spent 1 billion on ammunition through different initiatives.
Over the last couple of months, we tried to speed up our support and realized 2 billion in support.
In the upcoming year, we will realize another 3 billion in support.
With this level of support, we are in the top 5 when it comes to support to Ukraine, both in absolute and in relative terms.

Let me be very clear, if the fighting stops over the course of this year, we need to continue our military support to Ukraine.
The Ukrainian military needs to be further strengthened and modernize, so it can deter any future Russian aggression.

2) Second, in addition to the military support, we need to work on peace through strength.

Of course, we all want peace, first and foremost Ukraine.
But the only possible option is peace through strength.
Because we know the opposite is also true, if Putin sees any weakness, he will exploit it.
Weakness will lead to more war in the future.
So we want peace through strength, not war through weakness.

So we want durable peace, but also just peace.
Putin should not be rewarded for his aggression, or the rewards should be as limited as possible.
It is up to Ukraine to decide to what extent they want to compromise.
They need to decide what is just.
That's why Ukraine should sit at the negotiation table.
Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine.

In order to realize just and durable peace that, Ukraine needs robust security guarantees.

We need to define quickly what those security guarantees should look like.

The United States asked European countries to take the lead in this and to come up with a proposal.

We should answer that call, otherwise Europe will not participate in any negotiations.

We don't want the United States to decide for us, since it is about our security in Europe.

And we as European countries should shape the conditions in which European military means can be deployed.

Nothing about Europe without Europe.

I said it a bit as a joke, but I mean it seriously: no troop formation without representation.

A few conditions and requirements must be very clear.

Any troop deployment must have a clear mandate, sufficient military means, and US backing to maintain escalation dominance.

And this needs to be shaped in close coordination with NATO, because we cannot simply take away military assets from NATO territory.

This would make us vulnerable towards Russia.

That's why the puzzle is complicated.

And to make it even more complicated, of course we know that Russia will not simply agree on this.

They will push the Americans and others at the negotiation table to have no European presence in Ukraine and no US backstop.

But we need to learn lessons from the past, from peace missions and deterrence forces, and not find ourselves into weak structures.

Because it may lead to a ceasefire in the short term, but will be the foundation for further war and aggression.

That's a clear lesson we should learn from the past.

3) Third, we do not only need to strengthen Ukraine and create robust peace there, but also strengthen our own military force and strengthen NATO.

The inconvenient paradox is that a ceasefire or peace agreement in Ukraine, can make the rest of Europe less secure.

At this point, Russia is using almost all its military capabilities in Ukraine, which makes it impossible for them to seriously threaten or even attack other European countries.

But if the fighting in Ukraine stops, our intelligence agencies estimated it may take slightly over a year for Russia to regroup and to move its military resources to another place along the NATO border.

We are seeing that Russia is ramping up its war economy even more.

It is producing increasing numbers of weapons. Recruiting more and more soldiers.

The Russian war machine will only continue to expand.

And let's imagine that Russia would move 300.000 soldiers from Russia to the border of the Baltic States, and does a large military exercise there.

We know from three years ago that we only know 7 days before if it is just a large scale military exercise, or the preparation for a large scale invasion.

Can you imagine how much panic there would be in the Baltic States. How much panic in Poland and in the rest of Europe.

We know Putin has the intention to realize his imperialistic ambitions. When he talks about restoring the Russian world, the Russkiy Mir, he talks about the Baltic States, which are full members of NATO and the EU. We know Putin wants to take revenge after the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of Russia's sphere of influence.

We know Putin wants to divide the West, and destabilize Europe. Why not do a large scale military exercise close to NATO borders? Why not have a few drones enter the NATO air space? Or have a Russian minority in the Baltic States take up arms?

Is this all article 5? Putin would love to test us, to provoke us, see how we respond.

Given the current state of the Russian economy, Putin has every interest to prolong his aggression.

His war economy needs to keep running, otherwise there would be a big economic recession.

He doesn't want all the soldiers, some of them criminals who came from jail, return to society with their traumas and physical scars.

Another reason why Putin has an interest to maintain a huge land army.

In short, Putin has the intention, the military capabilities and it is in his interest to repeat his imperial aggression.

Maybe in Ukraine, maybe in the Baltic States, maybe at another place.

One way to avoid this, is to make sure our deterrence is strong enough.

That's why we all need to invest more in our military.

That's why we need to invest more in our industrial capacity, because currently it is taking too long for the industry to deliver all the military equipment we need.

And we know that not only the threats are growing, but the United States is also asking us to take more responsibility.

We need to create a roadmap in which the United States and European countries agree on how responsibilities will be shifted.

So a lot of work needs to be done in a short amount of time.

4) Finally, not only the military, not only NATO or the EU, but everyone of us needs to act in order to strengthen our resilience.

Many of the military activities from Russia might seem far away, but the Russian aggression is all around us.

We will probably never have a Russian tank in our backyard, but we do have Russian hackers in our routers, digital systems, our energy infrastructure et cetera.

Russia and its friends are becoming bolder with their malicious hybrid activities across the European continent.

We see Russian warships in the North Sea, the sabotage of critical infrastructure, relentless disinformation campaigns.

Not to mention surveillance drones over military bases, daily cyber attacks and even propaganda blaming NATO for atrocities committed by Russia itself.

And if one of the NATO members is attacked by Russia, we need to be ready to support. In that case, a huge amount of military assets need to be mobilized and will run through the Netherlands from our ports to the east.

In such scenario, Russian aggression will affect us all.

That's why I said before, in the Netherlands, we do not live in war, but we do not live in peace either.

We live in a grey zone, in between war and peace.

In order to make our society more resilient, we do not only need to look at the military, or at NATO or in the EU.

We all can contribute to our resilience.

As individuals, we can make sure we are ready for any negative scenario, such as a energy or internet outage for 48 hours.

We all work for different organizations. You can all ask your organization whether it is ready for any crisis scenarios.

Is it clear for everyone what to do in such situation. Are the responsibilities clear?

From every organization which has done these crisis simulations, I hear that is incredibly useful and often very confronting.

And finally, you can ask yourself whether you have useful skills and capabilities for the military.

We do not only look for soldiers, but we look for people with skills in IT, logistisch, health care et cetera.

We need to massively increase the number of reservists, if we want to make our military more flexible and scalable.

In peace time, the question is what the military can do for society.

In war time, and also in the grey zone, the question is what you can do for the military.

To summarize, we need to support Ukraine, create robust security guarantees in Ukraine, we need to reinforce our own military and NATO, and we need to strengthen our resilience.

So there is a lot we need to do.

We need action now; Europe has only one shot at getting this right.

But the good news is, we can do it.

We are much richer, much stronger, much more innovative than Russia, China, Iran and North Korea combined.

But we do not have much time anymore, Ukraine has bought us time, but these times are over.

This year we celebrate 80 years of freedom in The Netherlands.

Let's make sure we will celebrate the 100th anniversary, let's make sure we will add 80 more years, let's make sure we pass on this freedom to our children and grandchildren.

Dear friends, today we mark three years of large-scale war in Ukraine,

We do not all have to carry a weapon, but we do all carry the responsibility to protect what is dear to us. For Ukraine, for the Netherlands, and for Europe. Thank you!