
RUTTE WARNS EU TO EMBRACE 'REALPOLITIK' FOREIGN POLICY

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The European Union should be "less naive and more realistic" about its foreign policy and not be afraid to exercise power, Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte said in a speech on Wednesday (13 February).

"The EU needs a reality check; power is not a dirty word. Realpolitik must be an essential part of Europe's foreign policy toolkit," he said.

Rutte spoke at the Europe institute of the University of Zurich, in non-EU country Switzerland, where he was giving the annual Churchill Lecture.

The wide-ranging speech will further fuel speculation that Rutte may run for Jean-Claude Juncker's job as EU Commission president, or Donald Tusk's as head of the European Council - although he has denied being a candidate for either post.

Rutte said the EU did not need its own army, which was suggested a few months ago by France and Germany.

"Nato remains our first line of defence and our guarantee of security, and in my opinion that rules out a European army," he said.

But Rutte added that soft power alone was no longer enough.

"Today we live in a multipolar world, in which a growing number of countries and political leaders seem to believe that international relations are a zero-sum game."

"This means that the EU, which was built on the power of principles, is increasingly being confronted by the principles of power," he said.

"But I seriously doubt whether this, on its own, will make the EU as effective and influential as it could be, as it wants to be, and as it should be in the future," he said.

The Dutch PM noted that it was "relatively easy" for the EU to "claim the moral high ground" while depending on the United States' protective umbrella.

The liberal leader said that the EU had leverage it could use geopolitically, like its market access, visa-free travel, trade agreements, and development aid.

It is quite a change for the Dutch politician, who began his career as PM with a much more

eurosceptic attitude.

But since the UK, a close ally of the Netherlands, decided to leave the EU, Rutte has turned around towards embracing the EU.

Increasingly assertive Dutch

Rutte's speech also marks an increasingly assertive Netherlands at the EU stage.

The country, a founding member of the EU, has been repositioning itself as an alternative to the EU's two major forces, France and Germany.

This happened while the United Kingdom was on its way out, while Poland, Hungary and Italy have developed antagonistic relations with the EU institutions.

Rutte mentioned specifically that democracy and the rule of law need to be respected in the EU.

"We must always draw the line when fundamental values come under pressure, as they have in countries like Poland and Hungary," he said.

"But a deal is also a deal when it comes to the euro and the Stability and Growth Pact. Because here too, bending the rules can erode the entire system, and we cannot have that," noted Rutte.

While he did not mention France and Germany by name, this appeared a clear reference among EU-watchers to those countries - which have been running budget deficits in defiance of the pact.

Rutte also mentioned US president Donald Trump criticism on multilateral organisations, and called on the EU to seize that as an opportunity to reform the UN and the World Trade Organization.

He also stressed that Trump has a point when calling on European Nato countries to spend more on defence.

Nato countries agreed in 2014 that they should spend two percent of their GDP on defence by 2024, but many European countries have not yet reached that goal.

"We need to stand by this commitment, not only because the Americans have a point when they press for a larger European contribution, but above all because it is in our own interest," said Rutte.

Ending sanctions vetoes?

Rutte also opened up the possibility to reform the way EU countries determine sanctions.

"One of the main problems is that, in many cases, member states and the European institutions are not on the same page, so in geopolitical terms we don't pull our weight as we should and could," he said.

Currently, sanctions are decided by unanimity, so a veto by a single EU country can hold up the entire process.

The Dutch leader called on his colleagues to "give serious thought to enabling qualified majority voting for specific, defined cases".

"Certainly in its own geopolitical back garden, the EU should be a political force to be reckoned with," he said.

There is a qualified majority when a measure has support from 55 percent of the EU member states that represent at least 65 percent of the EU population.

Kaynak/Source: