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Javier Solana

“Full agreement is not always going to be possible, but there must be a willingness to reach agreement”



Javier Solana | President of the Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics at ESADE

Born in Madrid in 1942. He holds a degree in physical sciences from the Complutense University of Madrid. He continued his academic training as a fellow at the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), and later in the United Kingdom and the United States, where he received Fulbright scholarships to pursue postgraduate studies. He has been a physics professor at the Complutense University since 1975, and throughout his academic career, he has authored over thirty articles in this field.

He is the president of the Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics at ESADE (Barcelona-Madrid), and the president of the Royal Board of Trustees of the Prado Museum. He is a distinguished member of the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution, a senior member of the Hertie School of Governance (Berlin), and the president of the Aspen Institute Spain. He is also a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations (London, Berlin), the Council on Foreign Relations (New York), the Munich Security Conference, the La Caixa Foundation, and the Telefónica Security Advisory Board. Additionally, he is a visiting professor at the London School of Economics, where he was awarded an honorary title in December 2010, and a Fisher Family Fellow at Harvard.

From 1999 to 2009, Solana served as the Secretary General of the Council of the European Union (EU), and from 1995 to 1999, he was the Secretary General of NATO. Solana is the former High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) of the European Union. Previously, he held various ministerial positions in the Spanish government, including that of Minister of Foreign Affairs.

“Growth must continue, but in a different way that is compatible with our responsibility to the planet”

During your professional career you have held several ministerial positions, served as secretary general of NATO, and been the EU's high representative for common foreign and security policy. Therefore, you have been surrounded by prominent European leaders and has participated in significant international negotiations. In your experience, what are the characteristics you most admire in a leader? How would you define a successful model of leadership?

I don't think there is only one single successful model of leadership. There are some essential elements to being able to lead, such as having the necessary skills to ensure that others accept your leadership and being a generous person. I believe that generosity of spirit is absolutely essential.

A leader not only has to project their skills outwards, they also have to give to their teams and be a good person, in the best sense of the term.

Whilst serving at NATO, you have had to deal with various geopolitical conflicts, how do you think the member states' commitment to the European Union has evolved in recent years? What challenges do you think the EU will have to tackle in the coming years?

Relations between the US and the EU, which were at their lowest point under President Trump, were restored at the summit held in Madrid. There is always some tension because there is competition, but we are nonetheless allies who will never fight each other.

The European Union, through the Next Generation funding promotes investment in research, innovation, and a fair climate and digital transition. In addition we pay particular attention to the fight against climate change and the protection of biodiversity and equality. In this regard, in your opinion, how do you see public-private partnership helping to meet these challenges and what role do you see it playing in this commitment?

Harmony between the public and private sectors is essential. Full agreement is not always going to be possible, but there must be a willingness to reach agreement.

Rising energy prices and inflation have created a scenario of considerable uncertainty for companies and for the economy in general. What are the main levers that business leaders should use in order to boost economic growth?

Economic growth is achieved through increased productivity. We are going to be confronted by very interesting issues from the point of view of technology and artificial intelligence. At the same time, energy issues present a twofold challenge. Energy must be produced in a variety of ways, because we cannot separate (economic) growth from climate change. Growth must continue, but in a different way that is compatible with our responsibility to the planet.

Spain will take over the presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2023 and will be responsible, together with Belgium and Hungary, for defining the Union's long-term objectives and drawing up a joint programme of the main issues to be addressed by the Council. What are the real problems that the Union should focus on addressing and what role do you think Spain should play as President of the Council?

The President does not have a special role, have more votes or a greater capacity to do things. What the President has to do is to organise the time spent on discussions, meetings, etc. I think we are perfectly qualified to carry out this task. And to put certain topics on the agenda, not necessarily with the expectation that they will be resolved in during our presidency, but rather to ensure they are included. I have served as the Spanish Foreign Minister during several European presidencies and they have always gone well for us. There is no reason to think it will be any different this time.

For the first time, the President of the European Commission is a woman, a milestone that demonstrates that women are increasingly occupying more roles of responsibility in the various different areas of society. However, while women making progress in certain senior executive roles, significant glass ceilings remain in the business world. In your opinion, how can we promote the talent of women in the private sector?

I think that there is a strong sense of equality in the European Union. Men cannot exist in isolation, there must be men and women in very similar proportions to those we see today.

I believe that at this point in history, women are better prepared than men to take on certain roles. I mean, strength is no longer an issue in today's world, so there is no reason why it should play a role at all.

Women today have more skills than men for the modern world. From a historical perspective, I would not be afraid to say that. Women must have a greater presence in the contexts in which decisions are made.

In addition to diversity, sustainability is another major challenge that our society faces. It is essential to encourage sustainable companies that take into account not only economic, but also environmental and social issues in order to create value in the short and long term. In this context, how can public-private partnership help companies meet the challenges they face in relation to the 2030 Agenda?

The private sector has to take action and the public sector should facilitate that action in order to reduce inequality. The purpose of the private sector is to produce and take the steps necessary to ensure that the country continues to grow. The division between the private and the public should be based on cooperation and collaboration.

“There must be men and women in very similar proportions to those we see today”

In recent years, a tide of young people has emerged who have become political leaders. However, a similar trend is not as pronounced in other fields such as science and technology. Do you believe that the issue may be a lack of role models for young people?

I think the level of education in Spain has improved. The youth of today are receiving a better education than their elders, our elders. How companies take young people on, help them and pay them, needs to work well.

Spain currently has a pool of young people who are well-prepared and companies need to take advantage of that.

Finally, there is a gap in Spain in terms of labour market integration. In addition to diversity, sustainability is another major challenge that our society faces. What positive message would you send out to future generations?

It is a message I would send to all generations. In life we must be optimistic, being pessimistic is absurd. One needs to be hard working, generous and know how to get on with others. Empathy is essential in today's world, knowing that others are living in worse circumstances. We should not forget they exist, they form part of our community as human beings.

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