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11TH ZAGREB SECURITY FORUM – OPENING SPEECH

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Your Excellencies,

distinguished participants of the 2026 Zagreb Security Forum!

As Commandant of the Austrian National Defence Academy, the Austrian Armed Forces' foremost research and educational institution, I am delighted and, at the same time, honoured to be able to share my thoughts with you in this distinguished gathering! would like to take this opportunity to thank the organisers, the Dr. Franjo Tuđman Defense and Security University and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, for their invitation.

The National Defence Academy in Vienna is the highest education and training facility of the Austrian Armed

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Forces. We are responsible for well-educated and well-trained officers to the highest ranks, for the advanced training of political and economic key personnel on national decision-making level and for research and knowledge management on national level.

I am particularly pleased to be here in the Croatian capital Zagreb, as Austria and Croatia are linked by more than just a long-shared history and the current membership in the European Union. Our two countries are bound by deep friendship and close cooperation.

Trade between our two countries already amounts to several billion euros. Croatia and Austria are key partners within the EU in the fight against human-trafficking. Furthermore, through the planned expansion of the LNG terminal on the island of Krk, Croatia plays an important role for Austria and other Central European countries in diversifying their future energy supply.

For both Austria and Croatia, the consolidation of peace in the Western Balkans is an important foreign policy objective. This is demonstrated, for example, by our ongoing participation in the military peace support missions KFOR in Kosovo as well as EUFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the political sphere, our two countries are active within the EU as part of the "Friends of the Western Balkans" group, with a view to advancing the accession process of the Western Balkan states through various initiatives, such as their gradual integration into the EU single market.

In the field of defence policy, Croatia and Austria are jointly involved in the Central European Defence

Cooperation (CEDC). Established in 2010 as a joint military-political forum for Central European states, the CEDC aims at exchanging views on their security interests and making better use of military resources within the framework of the pooling and sharing process. Austria and Croatia also use this forum to support security cooperation with the Western Balkan states.

And let us not forget the most recent "Roundtable on Security and Stability" in the framework of the Three Seas Initiative. This forum was hosted by the Dr. Franjo Tuđman Defense and Security University and brought together Commandants of the highest Research and Training Institutions in the Three Seas Initiative member countries to exchange views on current and emerging security challenges and risks as well as options for cooperation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me to also share here a few thoughts on the Middle East. Just as Croatia until 2019, Austria has currently deployed soldiers with UNIFIL in Lebanon.

Alongside the theatre of war in Ukraine, the Middle East, with its instability, represents a significant and relevant area for Austria's security interests. The competition amongst globally active states for regional influence in the Middle East, the war waged by the US and Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as Israel's military engagement in the Gaza Strip, in Lebanon and the West Bank, are being closely monitored by Austria and require constant observation.

Despite Austria's geopolitical position in Central Europe, the effects of the conflicts in the Middle East

impact us strongly, whether that concerns military threats to our soldiers in the region, the potential danger posed by terrorist activities within Austria itself, or the disinformation and influence exerted by the Arab, Persian and Kurdish diaspora in Austria.

The disruptive events in the Red Sea, the Mediterranean as well as the Gulf region all call for strengthening the resilience of the respective populations, both at European level and at bilateral level through a joint cooperation with EU partner states. I therefore welcome the opportunity to address you today in order to contribute to this cause, alongside a substantive exchange on security policy.

In addition to these specific security policy challenges, the disruption of trade routes and the resulting distortions in the international crude oil markets are placing an increasing strain on the domestic economy. Austria's membership in the European Union and its upcoming membership of the United Nations Security Council demand particular diplomatic skills and a precise understanding of the situation at hand. As the seat of OPEC and the OSCE, as well as hosting a key United Nations mission, Austria is actively endeavouring to promote a sustainable political and diplomatic solution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to highlight a few essential points:

Europe is at a geostrategic inflection point. This means we are facing external threats, especially coming from Russia and China, but also an unfamiliar surrounding as

a result of the shift in the United States' foreign policy. On the other hand, we also have to deal with internal fragmentation, stemming largely from populist rhetoric across Europe as a consequence of the absence of a reliable leadership.

We are furthermore grappling with significant economic dependencies, especially concerning crucial sectors such as energy, supply chains and finance. Simultaneously, competitiveness pressures demand urgent structural reforms.

Consequently, defence autonomy is non-negotiable! Europe must invest in military capabilities, space-based infrastructure, and coordinated deterrence as the U.S. pivots away. Modern warfare depends on secure communications, intelligence, and data processing, much of which relies on space-based capabilities. Europe already has foundational assets (such as Isar Aerospace or the Ariane 6 launch system) but we must integrate and prioritise the strategic deployment of these resources.

Having said this, I think it shows very clearly that political unity is the essential linchpin! Without sovereignty pooling and majority decision-making, Europe risks irrelevance in global power dynamics.

In the light of these developments, joint cooperation on strengthening Europe's Strategic Situation becomes a necessity. Let me therefore highlight some important cornerstones of the current security-policy landscape:

- First, Europe is positioned between the major centres of power represented by the United

States, China and Russia. Amongst this geopolitical shift in power, Europe must increasingly assert its own strategic interests.

- Second, the war against Ukraine has brought the existing peace and security architecture under harsh scrutiny and has fundamentally changed the European security order. Therefore, Russia must be considered as a long-term strategic factor in any scenario.
- Third, Europe must face its dependencies and improve its strategic resilience by reducing its dependencies in the areas of energy, raw materials, technology, supply chains and critical infrastructure.
- Consequently, we must strengthen our European capacity to act: All EU member states must further develop their defence capabilities, deepen military cooperation and advance our strategic autonomy.
- To advance our strategic situation in Europe, we need to place a specific focus on Multi-Domain Operations. This broader concept integrates civilian agencies, commercial infrastructure (such as space satellites and communication grids), and economic levers in their approach.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me summarize as a soldier and formulate my Commander's assessment:

- Crisis and war are influencing our daily life. This constantly happens in the cyber and information domains, endangering the sustainability of our societies by targeting at critical goods.

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- Crisis management has become the new normal. From the political to the strategic down to the operational level we are confronted with various challenges on a regular basis due to specific developments, for example in the strategic lines of supply.
- Therefore, the exchange of expertise and identified themes is crucial. Lessons Identified and Lessons Learned as well as accurate Operations Research and professional exchange processes in these areas improve our flexibility.
- We have to shape our decision-making processes by focused advice. This advice, gained through all different paths and channels of information gathering and collection of expertise in order to answer just in time, is of ever-increasing importance.
- Civil and military structures need to act and decide in close coordination and cooperation. The principle of comprehensive defence has to be applied in all fields of a whole-of-society approach. Psychological defence should be a core item in the education system, in order to prepare societies for winning the cognitive war.

In order to enable a good and prosperous future for our children, for our next generations, we should therefore consider and consequently apply the coordination of topics and themes, of common evaluation as well as common curricula for Research and Education supported by Operations Research and knowledge management in all our institutions and systems.

Thank you very much and I wish you a lot of success for the upcoming days.

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