

Keynote speech of Ambassador Peter Jan Kleiweg de Zwaan, Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the EU, at the ECDPM 40th Anniversary conference on Geostrategic partnerships for shared prosperity, 11 June 2026, Brussels

Intro

- Dear San, friends, Excellencies,
- It is an honour to be with you for ECDPM's 40th anniversary.
- I was present in 2011, at the 25th anniversary in Maastricht. With Paul Engel. I check my speech back then: multilateral system, quality of EU AID, MDG's. How the world has changed.
- Today, nobody would call the world predictable.
- International rules are under pressure. Economic relations have become strategic assets. Dependencies are political weapons. Power politics is back – or perhaps it never left.
- And yet, in the middle of all this turbulence, one thing has not changed: we still depend on each other for our prosperity, our security and our freedom. And the ACP countries play a fundamental role.
- And that is exactly where trade, development and foreign policy meet – and where organisations like ECDPM matter.

1. No more “silos”: prosperity, security and freedom are connected

- Let me start with this basic point: we can no longer afford a foreign policy in separate boxes.
 - One box for trade and investment.
 - One box for development cooperation.
 - One box for security and defence.
 - And overarching: human rights, the rule of law and multilateralism.
- In practice, these issues are intertwined.
- Take prosperity.
- The European Union is an economic heavyweight: a large internal market, strong companies, excellent universities and research institutes. For many countries, Europe is an attractive market and a potential source of investment, knowledge and technology.
- But our prosperity is more fragile than before.
- We have seen how quickly supply chains can be disrupted, how energy markets can be weaponised, how access to critical raw materials can become a bargaining chip.
- If Europe wants to remain competitive and resilient, we need to:
 - keep trade open where possible,
 - reduce risk dependencies,
 - secure access to key raw materials,
 - and invest in green and digital transitions.
- For partner countries, the questions are just as concrete:
 - How do we attract investment that creates economic development and decent jobs?
 - How to scale up value chains instead of just exporting raw materials?
 - How to grow without locking oneself into new dependencies?
- So the overlap in interests is obvious: resilience, competitiveness, development and sustainable growth, and good governance and human rights.

- This is where development cooperation comes in – not as charity, and not as a separate box, but as part of a broader foreign policy.
- If we ignore these linkages, we will end up with policies that contradict each other. If we take them seriously, we can create mutual beneficial partnerships that actually work.

2. A fragmented world: we need more partners, not fewer

- The second reality we face is fragmentation.
- Countries are reassessing their partnerships and forming new and more flexible alliances. This goes for countries all over the world.
- For Europe, this means two things:
- We need to diversify our partners and rely not only on the partners we have always known.
- We cannot expect others to simply line up behind our positions.
- We will have to:
 - strengthen ties with long-standing allies,
 - and at the same time work more seriously with countries that do not always share our views.
 - But also to stand up for common values, like international law, and condemn obvious violations, like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. ACP could be more vocal!
- Developing countries and emerging economies are increasingly central players in shaping the world we live in.
- On many topics - trade, climate, energy, food, migration, security – we can find overlapping interests.
- So the question is not whether we need partnerships. We do.
- The question is how we build them in a way that is beneficial for both, upholds the international legal order and supports democracy – especially when we do not agree on everything.

3. “Equitable partnership”: only meaningful if we are honest about interests

- This brings me to terms we hear very often: “mutually beneficial partnerships” and “own interest”.
- It sounds good. But it only has value if both parties are clear about what it means.
- Sometimes there is clear overlap. Sometimes there is tension.
- Mutually beneficial partnerships does not mean pretending those tensions do not exist. It means putting them on the table and trying to manage them in a fair way.
- If we avoid them, we end up with nice communiqués and statements.
- If we confront them honestly, we have a chance of building durable cooperation.

4. The role of think tanks: making choices clearer, not more complicated

- This is where think tanks like ECDPM come in.
- Your role is to clarify what is at stake.
- You can:
 - bring in perspectives from partner countries that we do not hear enough in European debates;
 - test our assumptions against evidence;
 - and translate broad ideas – like “interests” and “partnership” – into specific policy options.

- But also visibility on results. We donors, and tax payers, want to see that our development cooperation is well spent.
- For governments, this is uncomfortable at times.
- Because good analysis does not only confirm what we already think; it also shows where we are inconsistent, or where our policies send mixed signals.
- But that is precisely why we need independent institutions.
- ECDPM, in particular, has built a reputation for
 - connecting Brussels, capitals and partner countries,
 - working across policy areas
 - and focusing on how cooperation works in practice, not just what is written in agreements.
- In a world where economic ties are more strategic and dependencies more political, this role is essential.
- And all sides need spaces where they can discuss difficult issues without immediately reaching for their official talking points.
- ECDPM has been one of those spaces for forty years.
- The Netherlands has a special connection with ECDPM. We supported its creation in Maastricht in 1986.
- We saw it as an investment in dialogue, in analysis, and in more equal relations between Europe and its partners.
- Forty years later, that investment has not lost relevance – it has gained relevance.

Closing

- Let me conclude.
- We live in a world where:
 - prosperity, security and freedom are closely linked,
 - partnerships are necessary but more complex,
 - and words like “partnerships” are easily said, but not easily put into practice.
- If we want to move beyond slogans, we need three things:
 - clearer interests,
 - more honesty,
 - and more listening.
- Think tanks like ECDPM can help us with all three.
- So on this 40th anniversary, I want to congratulate ECDPM – its staff, its leadership, its partners past and present.
- You have helped shape the conversation between Europe and the rest of the world for four decades.
- I am convinced that your role will be even more important in the years ahead.
- The Netherlands looks forward to continuing this cooperation – and to being challenged by you.
- 40 more years to go!
- Thank you.