



In dialogue with Mr. Thomas Juergensen, Head of Trade and Economic Affairs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kingdom of Bahrain, Sultanate of Oman, and State of Qatar



Over the past 25 years, you have worked in the areas of trade and economics in various functions in the European Commission. Can you tell us a little bit more about what your experience entailed?



I have been working as a trade lawyer, a trade negotiator, and a trade diplomat. Trade politics has changed a lot over the years. When the WTO was established in 1995, it was a time of cooperation and globalization. There was a belief that with the new multilateral rules problems like for instance poverty and development could be resolved. Developing countries would get easier market access to the industrialised countries and trade conflicts would be resolved by an equal, binding dispute settlement system. These were exciting and optimistic times.

Today, the world is very different. We live in a world of global power competition. That also affects our trade and economic policies. Everybody is becoming more inward-looking and the old premise of “might is right” sees a renaissance. It has become much more difficult to make the case for cooperation and market openings even if, from a purely rational point of view, the international division of labour is for everybody’s economic benefit.

We have to take the world as it is. But, in my experience, the premise on which the WTO was created – division of labour, cooperation, binding resolution of disputes - is still the best way forward. No country can totally go alone, the world is too complex and interconnected. Take for instance the case of supply chains. Even if countries strive for greater autonomy no one can produce every product on its own and for its own market. We have to work together.



Can you tell us about your specific role in the EU Delegation office in Taiwan? What were the most challenging activities and how did you overcome them? What is your most memorable achievement?



In Taiwan, I assumed the role of Head of the Trade section at the European Economic and Trade Office which is similar to the position I am holding in Riyadh. The challenges in Taiwan were similar to what we see elsewhere in the world, namely protectionism and market access barriers. It has become much more difficult to resolve such barriers and the general thinking is very transactional: What do I get in return if I solve your problem? This can be very cumbersome, in particular when the domestic rule that is at the origin of the problem is in contradiction with international trade rules.

I would think one big achievement has been making Europe more visible and creating a bigger unity amongst our EU Member States. We published each year various a brochure on trade and investment opportunities in Europe. We organised a road show with our EU Member States where the EU and its Member States were explaining to a public audience why it is interesting to invest in Europe.

As a trade diplomat, it is important to build bridges and to facilitate exchanges between many different stakeholders be it public authorities, business or the general public. This is as much true for Taiwan as it is for my assignment in Saudi Arabia.



How do you feel about taking up your newly assigned role in the GCC? What do you anticipate will be the most challenging aspects of further developing EU trade and investment with the GCC member countries?



I feel very excited to work with the GCC and its member countries. Many things are changing and I am impressed by the ambitious “Visions” put out by the individual GCC countries.

Change always offers new opportunities and avenues. I hope that during my term the EU, the EU MS, and the European business can seize these new opportunities for instance in investment or economic diversification. At the same time, we should also encourage businesses in the GCC countries to come to Europe and take advantage of the green and digital transformations that are ongoing. The EU and its Member States have laid out very ambitious plans for the future and international cooperation with our partners will be key to achieving these objectives. In November we will hold an EU/GCC Business Forum in Brussels and we hope that many companies and enterprises will join.

Another important task will be to explain better the EU, what it does and what it does not. Europe is often not well known and it is indeed complicated. The division of labour between the EU and EU Member States, the different European bodies and institutions, and the many different languages – without doubt, it is not easy. Yet, at the same time, the diversity, the many histories, and traditions also make Europe fascinating. In Europe, you can always find what you are looking for.

The EU’s motto is “United in Diversity”. Yes, we are very diverse but we are also united and work together for the common good. I worked for Europe for more than 20 years and it has been a very rewarding personal and professional experience. I would be very happy to share my knowledge with our interlocutors in the Gulf. Maybe it offers some inspiration for their own development in the region.



The EU published earlier this year a Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council detailing a Strategic partnership with the Gulf. Significantly this Joint Communication proposes a stronger partnership in a series of key policy areas and sets out a number of concrete proposals for the EU and the GCC and its Member States to strengthen their cooperation in their mutual interest, with a clear focus on delivering results. What would be the main key opportunities for GCC member countries under this partnership?



The Communication is a milestone in EU relations with the Gulf. The EU offers the GCC countries a comprehensive set of mutually beneficial activities and policies in a great variety of sectors ranging from trade and economics, research, and energy up to security and people-to-people contacts. In a bifurcating world, this Communication is very remarkable and timely. The EU is clearly stating its interest to upgrade its relationship with the Gulf and working more closely with the GCC countries. This also shows the respect and value the EU attaches to the Gulf countries.

Let me focus on the key economic opportunities for the GCC countries. Each Gulf state has formulated ambitious goals for its economic diversification. Europe can be a very good partner in this transformation. Many European companies have excellent know-how, technologies, and networks to help the GCC countries to achieve their objectives. If this goes hand-in-hand we would ultimately see a much closer interaction between Europe and the GCC countries both at public as well as private level.

Similarly, when it comes to the bilateral EU and GCC trade relations, the Communication offers a way forward on how we can make progress on each side's interests for instance on regulatory aspects, sustainable development, or investment. We can also establish closer sectorial cooperation for instance on energy, including hydrogen, transport, or even space. We already discuss these issues in the EU/GCC Trade and Investment Dialogue, and hopefully, we can achieve concrete results in the future.

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The EU intends to support the creation of an EU Chamber of Commerce in the GCC countries to further improve business cooperation. Based on your experience, what areas do you think should be a focus for such a chamber's activities?

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A European Chamber of Commerce would be a great asset for the EU, the EU Member States or European business. By bundling our forces and resources we are stronger together and have a bigger chance that our interest are taken into account. This is obvious for the businesses from smaller EU Member States but even for bigger EU Member States it is true. When we look at our competitors from the US and China, we need to work together more also at business level.

In my previous job, I experienced the European Chamber of Commerce Taiwan (ECCT) operating in a very professional and successful way. The ECCT has more than 900 members and an excellent and almost enviable reputation. They organised many prestigious events and published every year a very comprehensive overview of the business climate in Taiwan. It was a great reference point not only for us but also for business and the government.

It was also my impression that the national Chambers of Commerce worked very well together with the ECCT. Both have different mandates and memberships but eventually, they are reinforcing each other when the same message is amplified. I would therefore hope, that the European business would have the courage and the energy to create a European Chamber of Commerce.