

**Speech by Ingrid Thijssen (Chair, VNO-NCW,
Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers)
at the Captains of Industry Dinner (NATO Summit), The
Hague, Monday 23 June 2025**

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I prepared for today - and reflected on the state of our world - I had to think of my father.

He grew up in the 1930s.

When he was almost 13 years old, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands.

A few years later - near the end of the Second World War - he had to go into hiding, to avoid being put to work in Hitler's war economy.

This experience left a deep mark on his conscience.

My father was a pacifist at heart.

But he was also deeply convinced that you can only prevent war through deterrence and strength.

So after the war my father decided to serve his country, one of NATO's founding members.

He spent his entire career designing ships for the Royal Netherlands Navy.

And although he never served in uniform, he was deeply dedicated to his work.

And he never stopped telling us about the relevance of our

armed forces at our dinner table.

I loved to listen to his stories when I was growing up.

This was the seventies and the eighties.

The geopolitical situation at that time was - in a way - predictable.

Two large power blocks keeping each other in a tight hold.

But then, the Berlin Wall fell.

Europe, NATO and the world entered a new era.

My father passed away twenty-five years ago — almost to the day.

But not before passing on to me his strong sense of responsibility and dedication.

So I could not help thinking of him when — two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine — I sat at my own kitchen table with my two sons.

Both were born long after the end of the Cold War.

Two bright and ambitious students, growing up in an era of peace and prosperity.

But we found ourselves having a serious conversation about the state of our world.

About war, its dangers and consequences.

And about their personal contribution to our country - and to NATO - in the darkest scenario.

Until that moment I did not imagine I would ever have this conversation with them.

But I'm glad I did.

Because it made us realize very deeply that freedom, safety and security are truly invaluable - and worth fighting for.

I saw my sons' aspirations reflected in the words of Arsen Saakjan - a brave young man from Ukraine, lucky enough to escape the occupied part of his country.

"I feel freedom here, and that is the only thing I need",¹ he told a journalist.

Ladies and gentlemen

Freedom, safety and security have never been a given.

Yes, for some time we may have taken them for granted.

But not anymore.

New insecurities, geopolitical shifts and hybrid warfare are putting our freedom and security at stake.

And we realize, full well, that NATO is still the best guarantee for our precious freedom, security and prosperity. Just as it has been since 1948.

That's why we are here: to keep fulfilling NATO's essential

¹ https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2025/05/01/deze-mensen-vluchtten-uit-bezet-gebied-in-oekraïne-er-is-daar-geen-levensgeluk-a4891800?utm_source=chatgpt.com

promise.

And yes, this is about strategic and military objectives.

But it is a societal and economic endeavor too.

We need to stand shoulder to shoulder for our common readiness and resilience.

As governments and business, working closely together.

Economic progress and prosperity are simply impossible without security and stability.

Current developments underpin these grave necessities.

Fast-paced technological advances, shifting power dynamics and rising protectionism are all leaving their mark. Current geopolitical power struggles are no longer confined to traditional domains.

Cyberattacks are already threatening our critical infrastructure.

Outer space is becoming militarized.

Economies are being weaponized.

Besides, Russia's invasion of Ukraine proves that threats can escalate into actual aggression.

Societal resilience, political decisiveness, and our common ability to step up and deliver are desperately needed now.

As the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and

Employers, we have therefore embraced resilience as a key objective in our strategic agenda.

Resilience is both about economic and military security.

On economic security, this means investing in our economic foundation, our competitiveness, and in reinforcing international trade relations.

On military security it means quickly strengthening our defence capabilities.

Because no European country - including my own - can ensure its own safety.

We must stand - and remain - shoulder to shoulder.

Therefore, Europe rapidly needs to step up its contribution to NATO.

In terms of money, armed capabilities and personnel.

When it comes to money I am convinced that during this NATO-summit its members will decide to raise their defense budgets substantially.

But money means — first and foremost — that we need to get our economic base in order.

Because an army may start a war, but only a strong and resilient economy can sustain it — and ultimately end it.

Or - in simpler terms: money that needs to be spent, needs to be earned.

And the Draghi and Letta reports are crystal clear in that regard:

Europe's competitiveness is under huge pressure.

We are lagging behind in productivity, economic growth and high-tech innovation.

As Mr Draghi pointed out: improving our competitiveness is Europe's 'existential challenge'.

Without it, Europe will fall behind and be unable to safeguard its security in any context.

So we have a big, collective effort in front of us.

Europe must implement all the recommendations made by Mr Draghi and Mr Letta as quickly as possible.

And invest in strong trade and industrial policies.

It is now or never.

A strong European economy is a crucial condition for our second priority: heavily increasing our armed capabilities.

We need to accelerate scaling up our defense-industries big time.

We need them to specialize, develop and deliver quickly - both in the short and long term.

To help them do this, long-term procurement and a wide array of financing mechanisms are absolutely necessary.

This will provide our industries with certainty and predictability.

Allowing them to invest and expand their capacities with confidence.

But besides money for which we need competitive economies and a fast upscaling of our defence industry, we need manpower too.

And by this, I do not only mean the brave women and men in uniform.

Our defense industries need dedicated professionals.

And we need people that are willing to stand shoulder to shoulder when the situation requires.

The Dutch armed forces already need 3 times more reservists than they currently have.

These are our employees and our colleagues.

As business communities we need to enable them to serve when they are needed.

Because we too realize how fragile our freedom, peace and prosperity are.

So businesses and governments need to make clear and coordinated plans for this.

So our objectives are clear.

Now we need to make absolutely sure we meet them, by remaining shoulder to shoulder:

Within the European Union.

Within our Alliance.

Within our business communities.

And with our friends and allies in Ukraine, because they need our full and continued support!

Tomorrow's Defence Industry Forum will prove our common determination.

We will firmly state our strong and common ambition.

We will continue to work towards a strong NATO Industrial Framework.

We will put our ambitions into action, with tangible deals for procurement, delivery and upscaling.

And by doing so, our Defence Industries and business communities will ramp up their contribution to peace and security.

As your co-host tonight, allow me to offer the close collaboration of the Dutch business community.

A close-knit community that is already a crucial supplier to our American partners, for example.

Our Defence Industry consists of up to a 1,000 companies, excelling in maritime capabilities and in innovative, high-tech solutions.

With companies like Thales — developing and delivering world class radar systems.

Like Damen Shipyards — with their proud tradition of shipbuilding.

Like VDL — which engineers and produces military vehicles, armored parts and military systems.

Or smaller companies like Lobster Robotics — developing innovative underwater robots — and Avalor AI, with their world class software increasing drone capability.

Many of these companies are SMEs, offering an agile and adaptive entrepreneurial spirit.

A spirit that looks at today's challenges without asking

‘Why?’, but by asking ‘How soon?’

It is the same spirit that made my father proud to do his job serving our Navy.

It is the same mindset that makes me proud to serve the Dutch business community.

And it is the ambition that fuels my sons choosing their path in freedom and confidence.

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let that sense of freedom and confidence make this an historic gathering.

I truly hope that ten years from now it will be said of this Summit:

- that our alliance showed true strength and leadership.
- that our Defence Industries went the extra mile for our common security.
- that our business communities showed muscle and delivered.
- and that together we ensured peace and security for our children and grandchildren.

The Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers understands this more than ever.

And I know for a fact that all entrepreneurs and business owners here in the Netherlands stand ready to contribute in any way they can.

So let us get to work and deliver.
Shoulder to shoulder.

I wish you all a very pleasant dinner - and a very productive
Summit.

Thank you very much.