

Tiempo: 5 – 7 minutos

It is a great honour to introduce today President Martti Ahtisaari, who I greatly admire.

Martti Ahtisaari was elected as the tenth President of independent Finland in February 1994. This was a turning point for Finland, in that it was the first time that a president had been chosen directly by the people, rather than through the indirect system of electors. During its campaign, President Ahtisaari sought support directly among the people of Finland, rather than with and through the established parties. People recognised that this was a new type of leader, who in fact had always operated outside of the political system. As President, his main themes were openness, interaction and renewal of the political system, and concentrated on the problem of unemployment.

He was born (in 1937) in Viborg (belonging to the Russian Federation since World War II, when a part of Finland was lost to the Soviet Union). His family originally came from Norway. He first studied to become a teacher, but eventually got a job with the Swedish development agency (SIDA) in Pakistan, which came to change his life.

He eventually joined the Finnish Foreign Service and became Ambassador to Tanzania. This led to him being appointed as Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG, at the time Javier Pérez de Cuéllar) to then South West Africa, helping them in their process to become the independent Namibia. He returned to Helsinki as Under-Secretary of State for International Development Cooperation, while remaining SRSG for Namibia, before being appointed United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Administration. In fact he is now an honorary citizen of Namibia.

In 1992, after another spell at the Ministry in Helsinki, now as Secretary of State, he was appointed to lead the process in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Finally, in 1994, he won the social-democratic primaries in his home town, Uleåborg, and moved on to become President of the Republic with a convincing majority. After his two predecessors, the almost almighty Urho Kekkonen, and the much more cautious Mauno Koivisto, who had the powers of the President curtailed, Ahtisaari manoeuvred between the two positions, and today it is fully accepted and entrenched in the constitution that foreign policy is handled both by the president and the government.

Upon leaving office as President of the Republic of Finland, Mr. Ahtisaari founded a Non-Governmental Organisation, “Crisis Management Initiative” (CMI), where he is the Chairman of the Board. Other post-presidential activities have included facilitating the peace process between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement, chairing an independent panel on the security and safety of UN personnel in Iraq and appointments as the UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa and Personal Envoy of the OSCE CiO for Central Asia. Between 14 November 2005 and 29 February 2008, Mr. Ahtisaari acted as the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for the future status process for Kosovo, a major endeavour and, I guess, a truly difficult and challenging one given the stakes involved and the need to conciliate the conflicting views of the members of the Security Council.

Now, President Ahtisaari is active in numerous non-governmental and non-profit organisations. He acts as Co-Chair in European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). He is the Chairman of the Governing Council of Interpeace, the Director-At-Large of the ImagineNations Group, member of the Prize Committee of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation and member of the International Senior Advisory Board of West Asia North Africa (WANA) Regional forum. He is the Chairman of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation.

President Ahtisaari is married to Eeva Ahtisaari, and has a son, Marko, who is in the IT business. As an aside, those who worked at the UN at the same time as MA remember him as the only Under-Secretary-General who used to have lunch in the cafeteria. This is a telling detail of President Ahtisaari's character. He is a courageous and determined person, dedicated to the noble causes of peace, democracy and human rights.

Apart from an outstanding person, whose company and friendship I have always enjoyed, he is first and foremost a good European, a person truly proud of the values Europe embodies, and also truly worried about the possibility that Europe should miss this century's train and become irrelevant. Therefore, coming from different countries, and having different backgrounds, we truly share a certain idea of Europe, of Europe as a force for good, able to irradiate its values and, at the same time, to preserve its interests in a complex and sometimes troubling world. President Ahtisaari is in Spain to receive an important award: the membership of the European Academy of Sciences, which he fully deserves, and for which I congratulate him.

As said, among his current responsibilities, President Ahtisaari serves now as co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, a think-tank dedicated to the promotion of a more integrated and cohesive European foreign policy, to which I also belong, as co-founder, donor and member of its Board. Together with 70 other prominent Europeans (among which I salute today Mr. Marcelino Oreja), we believe that Europe, and the world, would necessarily be a better place should the European Union be able to speak and act with a single voice.

The Irish referendum one week ago, might have shown that Europe has a lot of problems when trying to communicate to its citizens, a serious problem that shall be tackled, because we cannot build “Europe without Europeans”, but it does not put into question the need for a stronger (and probably wiser and more democratic) Europe.

The Balkans, a place President Ahtisaari knows well, and where he has been able to first hand experience the potential, but also the pitfalls, of European foreign policy, is the topic we have chosen for today’s exchange of views. President Ahtisaari will speak for some 20 minutes, followed by a commentary by Alfonso Díez-Torres, Director General for Integration at the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Then a debate will follow, moderated by the Head of the Office of ECFR in Madrid, José Ignacio Torreblanca. We have assembled a high-level panel with key people from government, parliament, political parties, think tanks and media and we very much look forward to an interesting exchange of views. Let me thank you again from accepting our invitation to speak today, and our invitees for joining us today. We will follow the Chatham House Rule so as to allow for a frank exchange of views. This said, the floor is yours, President Ahtisaari.