

Speech by President António Costa at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2026

It is an honour to be back at this conference and share some reflections with you.

Over the past year, I have had the pleasure to meet with many of you in your postings. I wish to begin by commending your professionalism. You are the face of European Union abroad. And you represent our Union with dedication. Thank you very much for your commitment.

I would also like to commend you, dear Kaja [Kallas], for your close cooperation with the European Council, together with the European Commission, in advancing the European Union's interests around the globe. It is vital that the European Union speaks with one voice to defend its values and its interests.

We must pursue a multidimensional foreign policy, actively engaging with the international community to uphold the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and international law. It is in our interest to ensure that the world remains rules-based and cooperative. It is in our interest to avoid further world fragmentation. This is the best way to help Ukraine achieve a just and lasting peace. It is essential for Europe's security and prosperity.

We all know how difficult it is to build consensus on a common foreign policy when working with 27 different national foreign policies and geographical perspectives. Yet – it is my firm conviction – this diversity is the richness of our Union. It provides a 360-degree perspective on the world that no other actor possesses.

Looking at the map, it is easy to see: Africa, the Americas, the Middle East, Asia, and the Arctic are all our neighbours, sharing land and maritime borders with Europe. With them we have historical and cultural bonds, economic and diplomatic ties. In times of polarisation and fragmentation in the world, Europe's global vision is a true strategic asset.

Dear Ambassadors,

This multipolar world requires multilateral solutions. Not spheres of influence, where power politics replace international law. We know the new reality: a reality in which Russia violates peace, China disrupts trade, and the United States challenges the international rules-based order.

In this new reality, what should be the mission of the European Union?

First, we must defend the rules-based international order. We must uphold the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter, as outlined in our Treaties. Violations of international law must not be accepted – whether in Ukraine, Greenland, Latin America, Africa, in Gaza or the Middle East. Human rights violations must not be tolerated – whether in Iran, in Sudan, or in Afghanistan.

The war in the Middle East is of the utmost concern. Iran is for sure responsible for the root causes of this situation. But unilateralism can never be the path forward. Attacks by Iran and its proxies, like Hezbollah, against its neighbours – including Cyprus, a member state of the European Union – must stop.

The rapid response from Greece, France, Italy and Spain, sending military forces to protect Cyprus, is a powerful example of European autonomy and steadfast solidarity. Yesterday, in a video conference with our partners in Middle East and the Gulf region, I expressed to them our full solidarity and support.

The European Union calls on all parties to exercise maximum restraint and return to the negotiating table. The European Union stands with the long-suffering people of Iran. We support their right to live in peace and determine their own future. We believe their human rights and freedoms must be fully respected.

But freedom and human rights cannot be achieved through bombs. Only international law upholds them. Protecting civilians, ensuring nuclear safety and respecting international law is crucial. We must avoid further escalation. Such a path threatens the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. The consequences are severe, including in the economic sphere, as demonstrated by the

blockade of the Strait of Hormuz.

So far, there is only one winner in this war – Russia. It steadily undermines Ukraine's position by flouting international law. It gains new resources to finance its war against Ukraine as energy prices rise. It profits from the diversion of military capabilities that could otherwise have been sent to support Ukraine. And it benefits from the reduced attention to the Ukrainian front as the conflict in the Middle East takes centre stage.

We are now entering in the fifth year of the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, a gross violation of the United Nations Charter and a game-changer for the European Union. Since the very first day, the European Union has been unwavering in its support to Ukraine on all fronts: financially, politically, diplomatically, in terms of security and reconstruction.

I have been in Ukraine four times – in fact at the start of my term I was in Ukraine – since the beginning of my mandate to reinforce our unwavering support. In December, the European Council approved a €90 billion common loan, backed by the EU's budget, to cover Ukraine's financial needs over the next two years. And we will deliver on this commitment taken by all the Leaders. We must continue to put pressure on Russia to negotiate a just and lasting peace that is acceptable to Ukraine and that does not undermine Europe's security. I hope that tomorrow we will approve the rollover of current sanctions and approve the next package.

Second, we must reinforce multilateral cooperation. We will continue to be a leading supporter of the United Nations, and the reforms of the Secretary-General, António Guterres, with the UN80 reform initiative.

The United Nations must be reformed but it cannot be replaced. It must remain the cornerstone of the multilateral system. The only forum with universal legitimacy and the power capable to sustain effective multilateral cooperation.

As the top donor of international aid in the world – as well as to the UN main agencies – we will continue to take the lead in global solidarity, especially in these times when the UN system is facing major financial constraints.

We remain committed to the Sustainable Development Goals and the Pact for the Future. To the Paris Agreement and its commitments to reduce emissions by 55% by 2030 and to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. We have also agreed to an ambitious intermediate goal of reducing emissions by 90% by 2040. We are dedicated to ocean protection and the implementation of the High Seas Treaty, to safeguard the biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction. And to the reform of the international financial architecture for debt management, along the path set by the 'Seville Commitment'.

Third, we must continue expanding our global network of partners. The European Union is a reliable and predictable partner. In today's unpredictable world, this is a major strategic asset. That is why our partners are reaching out to us.

We have deepened even further cooperation with like-minded democracies, like the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, Canada, Japan, Australia. We have built the world's most extensive network of trade agreements, covering 80 partners. And we are in the process of negotiating or ratifying agreements with a further 27 countries – among them with Mexico, Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, and United Arab Emirates.

Recently, the trade agreements with Mercosur and India were game changers, covering 32 countries and almost 3 billion citizens. They send a powerful message to the world: instead of tariffs, the European Union offers partnerships; instead of spheres of influence we are building spheres of shared prosperity. Only a solid network of partners enhances our global influence and helps stabilise the international rules-based order.

We have seen this in action. In 2025, I have chaired 12 international summits, and together with President von der Leyen we met with countries and organisations representing more than 60% of the United Nations family. With the Western Balkans, Central Asian countries, the United Kingdom, Canada, Moldova, Japan, China, Egypt, the Latin America and Caribbean Community and the African Union. We held summits with Brazil, South Africa, China, and India – all the BRICS excluding Russia. This proves that both North and South are plural and can share long-term commitments to pursue common goals.

We already started 2026 with the first-ever summit with Jordan, along with visits to Syria, Lebanon and Vietnam. Of course, none of which would be possible without your work on the ground to support this. We must keep working with the same energy and determination.

Fourth, we must prepare the next enlargement. The European Union is a project of reconciliation and peace. These values are closely linked to enlargement, making it the best geostrategic investment we can make for our future.

Since the first day of my mandate, I have made enlargement one of my top priorities. As Europe's most successful grand strategy, it strengthens democracy and the rule of law. It expands our space of shared values, shared prosperity, and shared responsibility.

Ukraine's application for membership has generated a new dynamism, a new momentum, to the European Union's accession process. This momentum is not limited to Ukraine alone but also extends to Moldova and all six of our Western Balkan partners. Their future lies within the European Union, with accession based on a merit-based approach that ensures the highest standards for all. To make enlargement a reality in the coming years, we must take decisive steps. We should seize this momentum. We must

respect the merit basis but feel the sense of urgency.

The international system is changing dramatically. A world in which power politics are back in play. The European Union is responding to these changes by becoming more autonomous and more resilient.

Just as we made 2025 the year of European defence, we must make 2026 the year of European competitiveness. Both are crucial pillars of Europe's sovereignty.

The European Union's firm and effective response to United States threats against Greenland serves as an example of how our unity strengthens our global position. I recognise how challenging it can sometimes be to reach a timely, united position. However, we should have learned valuable lessons. Like the need to respond quickly to urgent situations, as we saw with Gaza. Like keeping up the momentum on our international commitments, as seen with the EU-Mercosur agreement, crucial to safeguard Europe's global credibility.

Because in times like these, values and trust are more critical than ever. They are the foundation of our influence and authority. This is what makes our Union powerful. This is what we must continue to stand for.

Thank you.

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