

9. mar. 2026 Bruxelles

Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2026

Dear Kaja,

Secretary-General, dear Belén,

Ambassadors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to once again see so many of you here in the room. And I would like to start by thanking and paying tribute to all of those who could not be here in person. I am thinking in particular of those posted across the Middle East working round the clock to get European citizens back home, to liaise with our allies and partners in the region, and to keep our own staff and their families safe. You represent the very best of our diplomatic corps and the very best of Europe.

And I start with the Middle East – not only because of the gravity and speed of the conflict there, but also because of what it tells us about the world – and how Europe and its foreign policy fits into that.

You will hear different views about whether the conflict in Iran is a war of choice or a war of necessity. But I believe this debate partly misses the point. Because Europe must focus on the reality of the situation, to see the world as it actually is today. I want to be clear: there should be no tears shed for the Iranian regime that has inflicted death and imposed repression on its own people. They slaughtered 17,000 of their own young people. And this regime has caused devastation and destabilisation across the region through its proxies armed with missiles and drones. Many Iranians, inside the country and across Europe and the world, have celebrated Ayatollah Khamenei's demise. As have many more people across the region. They hope that this moment can open a path towards a free Iran. The people of Iran deserve freedom, dignity, and the right to decide their own future – even if we know this will be fraught with danger and instability during and after the war.

And beyond this, we are now seeing a regional conflict with unintended consequences. And the spillover is already a reality today – whether on energy and finance, trade and transport, or the displacement of people. British military bases have been targeted in Cyprus – who I want to reaffirm our full solidarity with. NATO troops have been called upon to shoot down a drone. Our citizens are caught in the crossfire. Our partners are being attacked – and I have been in touch with many of them across the region to express our solidarity and support. And the longer-term impact is already posing existential questions. On the future of our international rules-based system, or on how Europe finds unity in these situations. All of this shows how precarious the global situation is today, how diverse the threats are, and how Europe will always be affected by what happens around the world. So the idea that we can simply retrench and withdraw from this chaotic world is simply a fallacy. I believe it is vital that we understand this as we shape our foreign policy for the year ahead.

Dear Ambassadors,

Over the course of this year's Conference, you will hear many descriptions of the state of the world. Whether it is about middle powers or multipolar disorder. You will discuss the importance of the rules-based international system – and of course the urgent need for its reform. You will exchange ideas about national security and economic security. All of this will feed into our work – in particular, ahead of the new European Security Strategy that we are working on with the HR/VP and our diplomatic service. But at the same time, these attempts to label today's world mask two tangible and structural realities which are far more important for Europe. The first is that Europe can no longer be a custodian for the old-world order, for a world that has gone and will not return. We will always defend and uphold the rules-based system that we helped to build with our allies, but we can no longer rely on it as the only way to defend our interests or assume its rules will shelter us from the complex threats that we face. So we need to build our own European path and find new ways of cooperating with partners.

The second is that we need a clear-eyed and hard look at our foreign policy in today's world, both in how it is designed and how it is deployed. We urgently need to reflect on whether our doctrine, our institutions and our decision making – all designed in a postwar world of stability and multilateralism – have kept pace with the speed of change around us. Whether the system that we built – with all of its well-intentioned attempts at consensus and compromise – is more a help or a hindrance to our credibility as a geopolitical actor. I know this is a stark message and a difficult conversation to have. But I also know that many of you have felt this tension in your everyday work. The point is that, if we believe – as I do – that we need a more realistic and interest-driven foreign policy, then we need to be able to deliver on it. And this is at the heart of my message today.

Dear Ambassadors,

Europe has already moved a long way in this direction in the last few years. We have become more adept at using our strengths in the pursuit of our interests: our market, our trading reach, our economic security levers. We have stood up forcefully when our Member States were challenged – for instance, with Denmark in the case of Greenland. We are investing in our democratic resilience at home to counter foreign information manipulation. And above all, we have started a generational project: European independence.

The goal is to make ourselves more resilient, more sovereign and more powerful – from defence to energy, from critical raw materials to strategic technologies. Your work to deepen, derisk and diversify our partnerships around the world is invaluable to this. This is what independence looks like in today's world. It means not relying on a single supplier for vital assets – from energy to defence, semi-conductors to vaccines, clean tech to raw materials. And for this, we need more connections with reliable, trusted partners. From the trade deals to the security partnerships that you have helped to broker – this is already making a real difference.

But we need to go further. We need to be prepared to project our power more assertively. For instance, to counter aggression and foreign interference with all of our tools – whether economic or diplomatic, technological or military. Or by being much more pragmatic when it comes to doing business around the world. As I have travelled around the world, I have spoken to many of you who have made the same point. Europe needs to get on to its front foot and start seizing the opportunities that are out there. Almost two thirds of global growth is happening outside of the US and China. Countries across all continents are looking for their place in the world. They do not want to be part of any sphere of influence. They just want to be prosperous and sovereign. This is why they are diversifying their trade relationships, because they too are hedging against dependencies. From Central Asia to the heart of Africa, from Latin America to South-East Asia – vast parts of the world are looking for stability and trusted partners. And this is our hallmark, our European offer. So as we look ahead, we must continue to seize these opportunities, putting our interests front and centre of our work.

And there are three areas where I think this is particularly important. My first point is security and defence. Europe has peace at its core. It is at the heart of our Treaty and the centre of our history. It remains an enduring mission for each and every one of us. In order to seek peace in today's world, Europe must be able to project power – to deter, to counter and to increase our influence. In simple terms, we need to invest in the means to protect our territory, economy, democracy and way of life. This will be at the heart of our new European Security Strategy. In all our assets and policies, we must mainstream security considerations. In fact, security must become the organising principle of our action. This must be the default mindset – from defence to data, from industry to infrastructure, from tech to trade.

Of course, we do not start from scratch. We have done more on defence in the last year than in decades before. We have started a surge in defence spending – up to EUR 800 billion until 2030. Member States are stepping up their investment at record levels. The message is clear: Peace and security in Europe depends on us, and we are taking full responsibility for it.

But standing on our own feet does not mean standing alone. We also want to work with trusted partners around the world. This is the core idea behind our Security and Defence Partnerships with countries from across the world. We have opened our SAFE programme to Canada. We are looking to integrate our defence value chains with India. And work is progressing well with Australia. Our Union had never engaged in this kind of security cooperation before. Some may say we are stepping out of our comfort zone. Others argue that we should focus only on what is happening on our own borders. But the threats we face come from all directions and all domains – whether cyber or space. So this truly 360 degree approach to our security must continue to drive our work. The

point is that the world around us is changing at incredible speed, and now Europe is changing too.

Dear Ambassadors,

When we talk about security, we must talk about Ukraine. A proud European nation that continues to fight for our freedoms, both as a future member of our Union and as Europe's first line of defence. My message here is clear: Europe will always stand with Ukraine – no matter what is happening elsewhere. We all want this horror and bloodshed to end. And no one wants peace more than the people of Ukraine. But the war must end in a way that does not sow the seeds for future conflicts. And this is what we continue to work on every day – with Ukraine and with our partners – to deliver real long-term security for Ukraine. So that we can secure a full, just and lasting peace.

What Ukraine needs now is, first and foremost, sustained financial support. This is why we proposed an EUR 90 billion loan to finance Ukraine's needs. You have all seen the challenges we have faced in getting this over the line – even after all 27 Leaders have agreed to it. This goes back to the point that I made earlier about whether our system is still able to deliver efficiently. But I can assure you that we will deliver on our commitments, because our credibility – and more importantly, our security – is at stake.

The same logic applies to enlargement. There has been much debate on how we deliver in a timely manner on this merits-based process. But it is of paramount importance that we get ready – by bringing the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine closer to our Union already now. Enlargement is not about ideology – it is a matter of European common interest and security. And we must be ready to deliver as soon as the time comes.

Dear Ambassadors,

The second priority is trade and investment with the world. Because trade is not just economics, it is power. You all know the list of new trade deals we struck – because you have contributed to writing it. We started with Mexico, Switzerland and Indonesia. Then Mercosur, after 25 years of failed attempts, and India, the mother of all deals. Australia is next. And we have not finished. The world wants to trade with Europe. Whether it is the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, the UAE, or five countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. Our trade network has never expanded so fast. And again, this is not ideology – it is about delivering for European families, European businesses and European industries. Because open markets and reliable value chains make our economy stronger. And a stronger economy at home makes us stronger in the world.

For instance, we are diversifying our value chains for chips and clean tech with countries like India. We are diversifying our supply of critical raw materials from Latin America, Australia and more. Our network of agreements currently includes almost 50% of global GDP. And more than half of Europe's trade is within our own network of deals. This means our companies can have predictable, rules-based trade with more than half of the world.

And we want to expand this community even more, for instance, by cooperating with the 12 members of CPTPP – the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The point here is that there is a compelling business case for trading and investing around the world.

Take Global Gateway. In the roughly four years since it was launched, we have already shot past our initial goal to mobilise EUR 300 billion. And I am convinced that we will pass the EUR 400 billion mark next year, because there is demand across the world for European investment. The reason is simple: when we invest in clean energy value chains in North Africa, or in skills for processing minerals along the Lobito Corridor, or in digital connections along the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) or in local pharma industries across Africa and the Caribbean, it is crystal clear that both sides stand to gain. Europe gains from stronger supply chains, our partners gain sustainable investment in local infrastructure, skills and jobs. These are legacy jobs in new local industries. And this creates new markets for local companies, and also for ours. It is a model that works. And this is why, in the next European budget, we have proposed to increase the Global Europe funding by 75%. The message is clear: Global Gateway is all about mutual benefits, and it is a means to develop partnerships and projects that advance our values.

Think for instance about strategic projects such as the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor. At first sight, its goal is to cut the overland journey between Central Asia and Europe from 30 to 15 days. But there is more to it. The corridor will also connect former enemy countries in the South Caucasus between them and to Europe. And just like coal and steel brought Europe together after World War Two, this new corridor can make trade and cooperation the norm in a troubled region and be a route not just to Europe, but to peace. My point is simple: in this region, as well as in Africa or the Middle East, our investments mean we have leverage and agency.

Or look at the success of the Pact for the Mediterranean which is revitalising our partnership across the region. The point is we must turn our financial strength into the power to make a real difference. This is what a pragmatic, interest-driven foreign policy can deliver for Europe – and for all of our partners across the world.

Dear Ambassadors,

The third point I would like to make is about our diplomacy – and how it can help deliver for Europeans. Our support to the UN and its Charter is an essential part of who we are. Together with Member States, we make the single largest financial contribution to the UN system – year after year. And you all know why. In a more conflictual world like ours, we need a rules-based global governance. Of course, the UN system also needs reform. And when traditional formats reach a standstill, we need to look for creative ways of addressing the most serious crises of our times. Europe has always been ready to engage in innovative formats for diplomacy – be they Quartets, Contact Groups or regional initiatives. And it is why we will continue to look at all ways to work together to deliver on our most pressing responsibilities and priorities. Most notably the reconstruction of Gaza and peace for Palestinians and for Israelis. Every new initiative should aim to complement the UN – not compete or replace it. We have made this very clear from the outset, and this only makes our engagement more important. But Europe cannot shape the world from the sidelines. We must engage to make our voice heard, protect our interests and, most importantly, to always bring our values to the table. As our foreign policy changes – this imperative never will.

Dear Ambassadors,

I want to finish by acknowledging that there are many priorities, many regions, many countries that I have not mentioned today. This is not because our work there is any less important, but rather because I wanted to make a broader point about where we stand – and about the very real choice that we face. There will always be a level of constraint on Europe's foreign policy because of geography and geopolitics. We have to accept that, and we have to be honest that we cannot solve every global issue or perfectly reconcile our values and our interests on each occasion. But what we can control is what guides our foreign policy, and how we choose to conduct it. As I said here last year, I believe that we need to be much more assertive in pursuing our interests. This is what will help us seize the opportunities that you see in front of you every day. But I believe that we also need to look very critically at whether our structures and tools are still fit for that purpose – or for today's world. The situation in the Middle East is not a trigger for this. It is, in fact, a symptom of the wider issue; as was Greenland, as is Ukraine, and will be many more places in the year ahead. The point is that, in times of radical change like ours, we can either cling to what used to make us strong and defend habits and certainties that history has already moved beyond, or we can choose a different destiny for Europe. We can build a foreign policy that makes us stronger at home, more influential globally and a better partner to countries around the world. A foreign policy that is a core pillar of European independence, that protects our interests and advances our values. Not with nostalgia, or by mourning the old world, but by shaping the new one.

Thank you again for your incredible work, and long live Europe.