European External Action Service (EEAS)

EU Ambassadors Conference 2025: Opening speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas

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Check against delivery!

Dear Ambassadors,

Dear colleagues,

Dear friends,

I have been looking forward to this conference since I started in this role.

There are so few occasions to be together.

When I was preparing my move to Brussels, I met many people from the EEAS. Everyone told me that I had to visit this country or that country, and that I had to do it during the first months of my mandate.

Every time it was the same message. It is urgent for the European Union, for our values and interests.

My first thought was: this is physically not possible.

My second thought was: pride. There is so much passion here, such a strong wish to get things done, to improve the EU's standing in the world.

You have faith.

And it transpires across the globe.

The European Council on Foreign Relations published the results of a survey last month. India, South Africa, Brazil, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia – these are just some of the countries where citizens believe the EU will have more global influence over the next decade. Where the belief in the EU's capacity as a global actor, on a par with the US and China, is stronger than what citizens from many EU countries feel themselves.

This is the power of our flag, wherever it is in the world. It is freedom, dignity, equality, prosperity. It is the power of attraction. This is our strongest tool.

And there is so much we can do. This is what I want to talk about today. I have five priorities.

When I spoke to you on my first day, I told you that the team comes first. You are my priority number one.

Again, I want to welcome our new Secretary General and your Deputy, Olof Skoog. You both bring so much experience to these posts and everything we need for EU foreign policy that delivers. As for any truly effective team, we need to pull in the same direction. From Ambassadors to attachés, when you carry the EU flag, you carry a responsibility.

Our plan is to grow Europe's reach, and here our Delegations must reflect our priorities, interests and ambition on the ground.

The EU around the world must be the EU we want to see in the world: the antithesis to the autocratic axis forming today.

The EU pushing forward cannot mean reducing the reach of our network across the globe. This is the opposite of what I want to do.

Dear Ambassadors,

No matter where in the world you are working, or how far you are from Ukraine, it is important that we all understand what Russia's intentions really are there.

While you are my top priority, Ukraine has to be our top priority.

Because Putin wants all of Ukraine, and it is not his to have.

He is not concerned about NATO – if he was, he wouldn't be pulling his troops from the borders of NATO to fight in Ukraine – he is more concerned about the expansion of democracy and the values that the EU stands for.

The problem is that Russia is fighting against us a few hundred kilometres from our borders.

Their missiles and drones have already crossed ours.

We have to help end this war.

But for peace to endure, in the way that Ukraine deserves, we must push the Kremlin to change its goals.

The only language they speak is strength.

This is why I welcome the US commitment to peace through strength.

Europe is already economically strong.

The EU has the strength and the means to outspend and outproduce Russia. What we need is political will.

And with our allies we are even stronger. Our collective GDP with the UK, US, and Canada is 25 times larger than that of Russia’s

But we must all be stronger on Russia.

Sanctioning those who help Russia keep its war machine running;

Blocking profits from oil and gas that directly support the state budget.

Our sanctions are working. Russia’s economy is struggling. We cannot loosen the grip now.

We also have to be stronger for Ukraine.

The EU is Ukraine's largest overall donor. We have contributed over 134 billion euro, including close to 50 billion in military aid.

We cannot be talking about doing less when we should be doing more. Where there is a will, there is a way.

So I don't accept the argument that this or that has never been done before. I want us to find further financing solutions for Ukraine.

The Ukrainians fight very bravely. And with our support at every step of the way.

Russia is an existential threat to us all.

So I don’t want to hear what we can’t do. I want to discuss and act on what we can do.

We should be the architects of creative solutions, not foot-soldiers along well-trodden paths.

I want this to be a guiding principle for this mandate.

Which brings me to working with those we can.

The EU has many partners around the world.

But there are none that are as important as the United States.

Some of us may not like everything our counterparts say or do there, but that’s democracy, we have to deal with it.

Transatlantic trade and investment supports more than 16 million jobs on both sides of the Atlantic. It accounts for 42% of global GDP. We need America and America needs us.

But you have to listen to your friends too.

Just as we want the United States to help stop Russian aggression in Europe, we have to understand America's core interests.

China is a strategic competitor. They are increasingly assertive, globally present and competitively so.
Operating through confidence and hope, to borrow from Dominique Moïsi.

Many European countries have considerable interests in China or in trade with China. And the EU is still China's largest market to trade in.

But we should not repeat the same mistakes with China that we made with Russia. Dependences make us vulnerable.

When we needed to, the EU proved it could untangle itself from Russia. So if we want to de-risk from China, we can.

China's assertiveness has also shown us where the EU can pursue closer partnerships – Japan, South Korea, Australia, New-Zealand and others in the region. Where many share our interests and values, from technology to defence.

Closer to home we can have a more productive relationship with the United Kingdom.

They are not in the EU but they are still in Europe. And there is much we can still do. More cooperation on defence, for example, is vital and a logical next step.

For the first time in many years, we have positive news from the Middle East.

- The weakening of Iran;

- the fall of the Assad regime;

- the release of hostages and the ceasefire agreements between Israel and Hamas and Israel and Hezbollah;

new leadership in Lebanon;

Progress can be made. And the EU can have a role.

If we are not there, around the table, asking the right questions, pushing for inclusiveness and championing democratic values, then who is?

We are also the biggest donor and this is too often unnoticed.

Currently the situation is extremely fragile and everything is interlinked:

The chances of the new Lebanese leaders reforming the country depend on the persistence of the truce between Israel and Hezbollah;

clashes are still taking place in both Gaza and southern Lebanon;

Israel's leadership is wavering on the return to a two-state solution. We are a long way from having all the important Palestinian political groups ready to recognise the state of Israel;

Iran will try to restore the position it has lost;

Syria's new leaders are certainly saying all the right words, but it is still too early to assess where the country is heading.

Where we can help, we should. I have been discussing this in depth within the Aqaba format since last December.

Because the Middle East has been and will remain a very important region for Europe.

They are our neighbours, and instability has an immediate effect on Europe, particularly through increases in migration and the threats of terrorism. Our contribution to the stability of the region is essential.

This is why we continue to support the reconstruction process in Syria and Lebanon, alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, and redeploy our border assistance mission – EUBAM - in Rafah, allowing the transfer of individuals out of Gaza including those in need of medical relief.

But I want us to do more.

With the Gulf, for example, there is a lot of potential, including energy cooperation.

And a new Pact for the Mediterranean can boost our relations with this region.

Dear Ambassadors,

There are some regions where the EU can do much better.

The majority of countries are reluctant to make a choice between autocracies opposing the West and the West itself. It was the same during the Cold War.

Every country is guided by their own interests, and not by whether they are allies of the EU, the US, China or Russia.

This is true across the world, look at Türkiye and the Gulf States in peace mediation roles with their own strategic agendas and transactional approaches.

The question is whether the EU should become transactional too. In many ways it is time we should.
Where we have common interests, there is a space for cooperation.

Our recent agreements with Mercosur and Mexico are good examples of this. They are pragmatic, logical and perfectly understandable. We should have more mutually beneficial projects like these.

This is the spirit which we will take to India this year. The visit of the College is a chance to deepen a relationship that represents a quarter of global population and GDP.

At this historical juncture, we need to be honest and accept that we cannot expect the same from others as we do with our Member States or allies. Every country's historical and cultural background is different. We will shape our policies, we will have a tailor-made approach accordingly. Be it in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, South East Asia or in the Pacific region.

We will assess how our interests align with those of our partners, but we are still Europe. We will fight for our companies to win public contracts, but never with questionable methods.

The EU and our Member States are still the largest global provider of Official Development Aid, over 40% of the total amount. This is a lot of money. When we spend it, we should be sure it reflects the EU's worth.

The systematic violation of human and civil rights, UN votes in support of autocracies that have declared themselves our enemies, is not space for cooperation or a basis we can do business from.

Dear colleagues,

It really is a pleasure to meet you all in person.

And seeing you together only underlines the feeling I have that we can navigate through this period, not only by sticking to who we are, but because of who we are.

I grew up behind the Iron curtain, with no choices and no freedom. And when Estonia regained its independence, we had the chance to live a life full of freedom, democracy and choices: a life with the EU.

I really know what we've got here, it's good, and we have to keep it.

We've also got a responsibility to share what we have, play a geopolitical role and grow this going forward.

Your experience and skills are truly unmatched and we need these skills, to navigate through this period. I know that we can!

We have clear understanding what we want to deliver:

Ukraine's defence for Europeans'` defence;

Maintaining and strengthening our alliances with like-minded countries;

Pursuing peace in the Middle East;

And nurturing mutually beneficial partnerships;

And with a team that pulls together, we can deliver on our priorities, grow our geopolitical role, and strengthen our greatest asset as the most predictable, reliable and credible partner in the world.

So, lets do this together! Thank you!

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