**European Commission -
Speech**

Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2025

Brussels, 4 February 2025

Dear HR/VP, my dearest Kaja,

Secretary-General,

Ambassadors,

Allow me to start with a very warm welcome and thanks to each and every one of you for your service to Europe. Many of you have supported and informed me on missions – we went on different missions and many familiar faces are here. And I must say, the quality and the knowledge that you have at your disposal at all times makes me really proud. It is a great privilege to represent Europe with such an outstanding diplomatic corps. And of course I want to extend congratulations to you, our new Secretary-General. Dear Belén, I very much look forward to working with you and you can count on the Commission's full support. Thank you very much for hosting me here today. In these turbulent times, we will need to rely on all of our strength and forces to help us chart the way forward and to keep up the good spirit and the energy that we have spread all over the world. And my dear Kaja, I am so glad to have you as HR/VP now, I am very much looking forward to working with you – for the next five years my dear.

Dear Ambassadors,

This year, I would like to depart from the normal convention for an Ambassadors' Conference speech. I will not dwell on our achievements – including yours as Ambassadors – that have transformed Europe into a geopolitical Union in the last five years. I will resist the usual temptation of namechecking as many places as possible. And I can already admit that I will not strike the perfect balance between regions, policies and multilateral institutions. No, this time I want to reflect the urgent need to understand the changing state of the world. But crucially also the more direct, more focused foreign policy that Europe will need in the years to come in this new world.

Dear Ambassadors,

Unpicking where Europe stands – how it can navigate and project strength in a harsher world – starts with the need to deal with the world as we find it. The need to build a European foreign policy for the people of Europe. I was in Davos a couple of weeks ago. It is true to say that the conversations are not always a bellwether for the true direction of global affairs. After all, it is a place where leaders have been coming for the last three decades to speak of the virtues and – less often – the risks of the rise of hyper-globalisation. And in many ways, that is still relevant. Because the truth is that the world – and Europe – is more connected than ever.

Since the turn of the century, the volume of global trade has doubled – even if trade within regional blocs is now expanding faster than trade between them. And we are now more connected in other ways – from our highly integrated supply chains to immediate capital flows or digital communications. But this time round in Davos there was a stark – and sometimes even dark – change in tone. And it chimes with many of the messages I have been reading in your cables from around the world.

The view of a world trending towards ever-more-cooperation and hyper-globalisation has become outdated. At least that is the feeling that people – and certainly many electorates – around the world have been making clear. And it is more than an abstract feeling. Great fears are back. From the fear of climate change, to Artificial Intelligence, to that of migration or simply of being left behind. And this also permeates into global affairs. Countries are weaponising their sources of strength against each other. And we are now well into an era of hyper-competitive and hyper-transactional geopolitics. And that inevitably affects every single one of our relationships. This is a world where we can no longer

take much for granted – including the rules and norms that were built over the past 70 years. A world in which major powers try to eke out any possible advantage using whatever tool works best – whether it be economic, technological or security tools. Sometimes all three at the same time. A world in which there is now a concerted attempt to build spheres of influence – and even grab land – much like in the 19th century or at the height of the Cold War. A world in which new authoritarian powers are clubbing together with a rogue Russia – ready to pounce on any division or weaknesses in alliances. A world in which emerging powers have become disillusioned with the way the international system works – and are increasingly looking for alternatives. In most cases, they will work with whoever puts the best offer on the table.

Some in Europe may not like this harsher, more transactional reality. But, dear Ambassadors, as I said at the start: Europe must deal with the world as we find it. And I am convinced that in this hot-headed world, Europe's best approach is to remain level-headed. It must make decisions not out of emotion or nostalgia for a world that once was. But rather out of calculated judgement about what is in our own interest in the world as it is today. Because foreign policy and diplomacy are not an end in themselves. We all know it. It is a way to deliver stability, security and prosperity for our citizens – and for our partners. That makes it all the more important that we stay true to who we are and what we believe in. The belief that every country must be free to choose its own destiny in a democratic way. That borders cannot be changed by force. That the UN Charter remains at the heart of our engagement. Our values do not change. They are enshrined in the marble and history of our declarations of rights, of our declarations of independence, of our Treaties. They are the living heritage of our tumultuous history. And they help to make us a reliable and strong partner.

But to advance these values, we need to change the way we act. We need to be bold. We need to be agile. We need to engage. We might have to engage in tough negotiations, even with long-time partners. And we might also have to work with countries that are not like-minded but do share some of our interests. Because the basic principle of diplomacy in this new world is to keep our eyes on the goal. That means, finding common ground with partners to our mutual benefit – and accepting that on occasion we will have to agree to disagree.

Dear Ambassadors,

This will be all the more important as the world becomes more dangerous and as economic competition speeds up. There is already a race on: from chips to AI, from lithium to quantum, from clean tech to space. An arms race. And new races will continue to speed up – on everything from the information space to the maritime routes or an advanced military equipment. We must do our homework here in Europe to keep up – whether by stepping up on defence investment – and this was yesterday, at the European Council, the top topic – or making our economy more competitive.

This is what our Competitiveness Compass is all about: being more competitive, making our own homework, that is necessary, strengthening our strength, closing the innovation gap. Setting out a joint roadmap for decarbonisation and competitiveness. Reducing our dependencies and increasing our resilience and economic security. This is crucial. Because only with strong foundations can we project our power. We know that there will be an increased use of threats and of economic coercion tools such as sanctions, export controls, and tariffs. We have seen this again in the last few days and how quickly things can escalate. I want to be clear: Europe will safeguard its economic and national security. But it is also important that we strike the right balance. One that places emphasis on the positive tools of economic statecraft – such as trade, investment, innovation and production. We want to avoid a global race to the bottom that is in no one's interests. That has to be our primary focus – even as we prepare for all possible scenarios. We want to focus on strengthening the economic ties that deliver for Europeans. Those that help to create jobs, bring down prices and strengthen our security.

And that is of course the case when it comes to the United States, a country with which we have the strongest of ties. The transatlantic partnership has been the cornerstone of peace and prosperity for the best part of the century. We share many of the same preoccupations – whether on regional stability or the global economy. No other economies in the world are as integrated in such an advanced way, as the European Union and the United States. Together, the EU and the US represent almost 30% of global trade in goods and services. And more than 40% of global GDP. European companies in the US employ 3.5 million Americans. And another million American jobs depend directly on trade with Europe. The whole trade volume between us is USD 1.5 trillion. The point is that a lot is at stake for both sides. There are jobs, businesses, industries here and in the US that rely on the

transatlantic partnership. So we want to make it work. And not only because of our historic ties but because it is simply smart business.

So our first priority is now to work on the many areas where our interests converge. And there is still scope to do so much more – from critical supply chains to emerging technologies. We will be ready for tough negotiations where needed and to find solutions where possible to work out any grievances and to set the foundations for a stronger partnership. We will be open and pragmatic in how to achieve that. But we will make it equally clear that we will always protect our own interests – however and whenever that is needed. This will always be the European way.

Dear Ambassadors,

The message that we need to pass to our partners around the world is: where it makes sense for Europe, Europe can make it work. If there are mutual benefits in sight, we are ready to engage with you. And a deal with us, comes with no hidden strings attached. Because our interests are transparent. If a partner country wants to invest in clean energy, like clean hydrogen infrastructure or in raw materials – we are ready to help, also because it will help us ensure our own energy security and independence and diversify our own value chains.

This is why we will continue to invest in Global Gateway. And this is why we are strengthening our trading partnerships. It is no coincidence that, in just two months, since the beginning of my second mandate, we have concluded new partnerships with Mercosur, Mexico and Switzerland, and restarted negotiations with Malaysia. Again, let me make the point that fair and free trade is not an end in itself. It is a means to deliver benefits, first and foremost for our Europeans. This is also why we are deepening our partnerships right across the Mediterranean region, for example with the multi-billion-euro partnership signed with Jordan last week. This will help develop local industries and tackle shared partnerships on both sides of the Mediterranean. Later this month we will travel for the first ever College visit to India to deepen our partnership right across the board. In March, we will have a Summit with South Africa, where we hope to discuss the first in a new kind of clean trade and investment partnerships. And we will have landmark events with partners in the African Union, Central Asia and far beyond. In times of rising tensions and barriers, countries are looking for opportunities to grow. In many cases they are looking for reliable partners to help fill a gap that may have opened up. And Europe is ready to do just that.

Dear Ambassadors,

This global engagement is more important than ever in today's world. So we need to be ready to work with all major players. This will be an intense year in our relationship with China,
as we mark half a century of diplomatic relations. You have heard me say many times that our relationship with China is one of the most intricate and important anywhere in the world. And how we manage it will be a determining factor for our future economic prosperity and national security. China is a vital trading partner – accounting for around 9% of our goods exports and more than 20% of our goods imports. And most of that trade is mutually beneficial. But we have seen growing imbalances and risks which come with doing business with China. We need to rebalance this relationship and ensure that our trade and investment relations makes sense for Europe, both for its economy and its security. So we will keep de-risking our economic relationship – as we have been doing in recent years. But there is also room to engage constructively with China – and find solutions in our mutual interest. And I think we can find agreements that could even expand our trade and investment ties. It is a fine line that we need to walk. But it can lead us to a fairer and more balanced relationship with one of the world's economic giants. And that can make sense for Europe.

Dear Ambassadors,

This new approach is about securing Europe's future security and prosperity. But this will only be effective if we stick to our enduring principles, which brings me to one of my central points for today. The war in Ukraine remains the most central and consequential crisis for Europe's future. Russia's full-scale war will soon enter its fourth year. Putin is trying harder than ever to win this war on the ground. His goal remains Ukraine's capitulation. And then we know what could happen next. Because it has already happened before. He would move on to the next target – just like he did after 2008 and 2014. It is not only the destiny of Ukraine that is at stake. It is Europe's destiny.

It is our first priority that we empower Ukraine's resistance. So far, our Union and Member States have supported Ukraine to the tune of EUR 134 billion. That is more than anybody else. Thanks to the

Ukraine Facility and the G7 loan, we have closed Ukraine's budgetary gap for the entire year of 2025. In parallel, we must speed up the immediate delivery of weapons and ammunition. And this will be at the heart of our work in the coming weeks. No one wants peace more than the people of Ukraine. But there is only one path to the just and lasting peace they are longing for. And this runs through military and financial strength for Ukraine.

At the same time, this is also the moment for maximum pressure on Russia. Its economy is struggling with high inflation and interest rates. Our 16th sanctions package is on its way. The phase-out of Russian fossil fuels must continue. And it is incredibly important that Member States extended the freeze of Russian assets. Now we can continue to put our minds to work on the most creative use of these assets to support Ukraine's fight for freedom. We must show to the Kremlin that the longer the war, the higher the price for Russia. Ukraine needs peace through strength. The people of Ukraine have resisted for so long because they want to be free, and they want to be part of our Union. This is their aspiration, rightly so. And no one can take this away from them. It is a matter of justice. But it is also a matter of security, stability and prosperity. This is a core interest for Ukraine and for all of Europe. And we will make it happen. And this is not only about Ukraine. In a world where size and weight matter, and where small countries can be blackmailed more easily, it is in our shared interest to unite the European family. So at the start of this new mandate, I want to be very clear. 2025 must be a year of progress for all those countries that are on their merits-based path to joining our Union. Completing our Union is in our core interest. And it will be a core priority in the five years ahead of us.

Dear Ambassadors,

My message today is that Europe is ready to play its part across the world. I believe that Europe must play its role to the fullest – for example in the Middle East. Hope – albeit fragile – has started to return. And Israelis, Palestinians and people across the region deserve for that hope to lead to stability, peace and prosperity and the two-state solution. There is a lot that Europe can do. Just last week, Member States agreed to lift some of our sanctions on Syria and restart our monitoring mission at the Rafah border crossing. We are the leading donor to the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian people, and we have already increased our humanitarian aid across the region. We are now ready to step up our engagement and look into reconstruction needs. The future of this region is being rewritten today. And it is in Europe's core interest to shape it, together with our partners. So we must be there. On the ground.

And Europe is ready to play its part across all global challenges. To uphold the objectives of the Paris Agreement and support Brazil in achieving a successful COP30 in Belém. To stand by the World Health Organisation in preventing new pandemics. And to provide humanitarian aid to those in need.

Dear Ambassadors,

We are lucky that we can count on all of you to deliver on that, together with us. And I look so much forward to working with you again and to continue working with you. But allow me to finish with a message for you and especially young diplomats from the European Diplomatic Academy who are here with my dear friend Federica Mogherini.

My dear Ambassadors but also young diplomats, you will hear many times this week that the world is a more dangerous place than it ever has been. That threats come in different forms and from many different directions. And that is true. But far too much talk about today's world is fatalistic. That we will have to endure history from the sidelines. But my dear young diplomats, ask all the Ambassadors here in the room: Much of the world sees Europe as stronger than we do. And Europe has much more agency in this world than we sometimes think. If we stay united, we are the ones – you are the ones – who can create the conditions for a more prosperous and secure future.

To draw on the work of the late Swedish academic Hans Rosling, we should resist the temptation to hope naively without reason. But also resist the temptation to fear without reason. Instead, we need a clear and reasonable idea of the world as it really is – and understand what we can do within. So, do not think in terms of pessimism – or even optimism. Think in terms of the possible. And that is exactly what Europe will do.

Thank you very much and long live Europe.

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