



Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2023

Brussels, 6 November 2023

Secretary-General, dear Stefano,

Ambassadors,

Heads of Representation, Heads of Mission,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Federica, it is a pleasure to see you here today,

I am very glad to have this opportunity to exchange with you again today and to thank you all in person for the work that you are doing across the world. Indeed, it has now been four years that I first had the chance to speak to you when this Commission took office. Back then, we spoke of the changing nature of politics and geopolitics, and of the instabilities and risks that lay ahead of us. Much has happened since then that was unthinkable and unpredictable. The world is in many ways an irreversibly different place than it was. Conflicts are multiplying around our borders. Ukraine. Gaza. The Caucasus. The Sahel. The horrors of these wars are appalling. The pain suffered by innocent civilians shakes the conscience of the world. And all of this is happening against the backdrop of huge transformations. Such as the devastating impact of climate change. Or the rise of new technologies – artificial intelligence, for example – that could redefine not only our economies, but our societies and our security.

These times of conflict and change call for Europe to be even more engaged on the global stage. The size and scale of today's events require that we act and think strategically, even and especially when the fog of war is thick and emotions run high. Our times require that our Union makes full use of its foreign policy potential, ranging from traditional diplomacy to trade, to humanitarian aid and to investments – just to name a few. These are the principles that have driven us so far: engagement, strategic thinking, and unity of action.

Today, I would like to focus on three of the most strategic and consequential issues we are currently facing. It is Ukraine, the Middle East and China. Of course, I will be happy to take Q&As afterwards and to address the other topics on which I do not have the time to elaborate during this speech.

Let me start with Ukraine. I was there over the weekend. The message that I heard from everyone in Kyiv is crystal clear. The people of Ukraine are longing to join the European Union. They believe in Europe. They trust Europe more than ever before. This is certainly because an entire continent – the European Union – has mobilised in support of Ukraine. But also because of the incredible work of the EU staff in the country. I want to pay tribute to them and take the opportunity to pay tribute to all of you – all of our EU staff across the world. I just looked at how many countries I visited during my mandate: I visited 37 countries outside the European Union – many of them several times. So I met many of you. I saw it by my own eyes. I listened to your reports – you know the traditions I have when going there. I learnt from you the latest developments on the ground. I want to thank you for your tireless service. You are indeed, in the best sense of the word, representing our European Union. And you can be proud of it.

Back to Ukraine. Russia's brutal war now lasts more than 600 days. On Saturday, I spoke in the Verkhovna Rada and what I felt was: yes, 600 days of war and bloodshed are exhausting – without any question. But President Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people are as determined as on the first day. And let me tell you what they told me. They basically said: Look at what we have achieved. Putin has failed on all his strategic objectives. His main goal was regime change. He wanted to overthrow the government in Kyiv. But not only has his offensives on the capital completely failed. Ukraine's government is standing strong, bolstered by internal and international support. The Rada, the Ukrainian Parliament, is adopting far-reaching reforms that many had deemed impossible before the war. And Ukraine is moving with ambition and determination on its path towards the European Union.

They tell me that, today more than ever before, we are the masters of our own future. And they are right. Russia wanted to erase Ukraine's national identity. Instead, the war has forged Ukraine's identity stronger than before. Russia wanted to weaken NATO. Instead, NATO is revitalised with two new allies, and defence spending rising across the European Union. Russia's army has lost half of its conventional equipment and sacrificed over 100,000 of their young men. Russian mercenaries have turned against their masters. Or think of the once feared Russian Black Sea fleet. Today, thanks to the brave acts of the Ukrainians, it has retreated from blocking Odessa. And there are countless more examples. So even if the situation on the ground is now evolving slowly, one thing is crystal clear: because of Ukraine's resolve, and because of our unwavering support, this war will remain a strategic failure for the Kremlin.

But we also know that Putin's failure will not automatically translate into Ukraine's victory. As the war drags on, and as we continue to cater for the daily needs of Ukrainians, we must also try to focus on the way forward, and on what it means to support Ukraine 'for as long as it takes'. I would like to suggest three main objectives that we must pursue.

The first objective must be to continue to work for a just and lasting peace, not another frozen conflict. No one wants peace more than the Ukrainian people. The main pathway to achieve this is President Zelenskyy's Peace Formula. That is why, we, the Commission, participated in all three meetings of National Security Advisers. You remember: Copenhagen, Jeddah and Malta. More than 60 representatives are working very hard to prepare a future Ukraine Peace Summit. So let me ask all of you to keep on engaging to gather more and more support for the Peace Formula from countries across the world. I know it is not easy, I know it is hard work, but in the essence, in the end, the whole world would benefit from a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. That has to be our main mission.

Second, Ukraine needs long-term security. We have to ensure a sustained military force capable of defending Ukraine now and deterring Russian aggression in the future. So that history does not repeat itself. This has, of course, strong implications for our defence industry. We must step up our production capacities. This is why we have introduced ASAP, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production. But we must, of course, also look beyond ammunition. We have to look at air defence – which is crucial at the moment being –, maritime capabilities, but, of course, for the mid and long term, also cyber and space. These are capabilities that are European by nature – if you look at them. They require European cooperation not only on research and development but also on the industrial front. We have to ensure now that no industrial bottleneck prevents us from protecting Europe and giving our full support to Ukraine. It is a window of opportunity now. And I would urge us to use this window of opportunity because it would allow us to take more decisive steps towards a genuine European Defence Union. This is a task I am very much supporting and working hard for.

My third point: The best way to give Ukraine stability and prosperity in the mid and long term is, of course, Membership in the European Union. Just think about it, to make Ukraine recover – Europe is the answer. To strengthen Ukraine's democracy even further – Europe is the answer. To protect Ukraine from future interferences – Europe is the answer. And – and this is very important – the reverse is also true: In a world where size and weight matter, it is clearly in Europe's geostrategic interest to complete our Union. Just think about it, with over 500 million people living in a free, democratic and prosperous Union. History is calling again. And Excellencies, it is for our generation to answer this call.

Dear Ambassadors,

This leads me to my second point, on Israel and Gaza. There is no justification for the horror that Hamas unleashed against innocent men, women, children and babies on 7 October. In the wake of the worst mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust, it is our moral duty to demonstrate our full solidarity with the people of Israel. Israel has the right to defend itself, in line with international law and international humanitarian law. This is and continues to be the essential starting point. And this is also what gives us the credibility to discuss Israel's response to Hamas' terror. But also to come forward with ideas about a much needed political solution, building on our legacy as champions of the two-state solution. And that is why it was necessary and appropriate that so many European Leaders visited Israel in the wake of the terrorist attack.

Supporting Israel is essential. Aiding civilians in Gaza is essential, too. The humanitarian situation is dire. The death toll and the suffering of Palestinian civilians is tragic. And as policymakers, we face a dreadful dilemma. Israel has the right to defend itself while Hamas bunkers, hides fighters and stores weapons below refugee camps and civilian infrastructure. Hamas is clearly using innocent Palestinians and hostages as human shields. It is horrific. It is pure evil. And our hearts bleed at the images of small children pulled out from under the rubble. All of us, as democracies and as human beings, have a responsibility to do everything possible to protect civilians who are caught in harm's way. So, while Israel has the right to fight Hamas, it is also essential that it strives to avoid civilian

casualties, and to be as targeted as possible. Because every human life matters, be it Israeli or Palestinian. And this is central to our diplomatic outreach in these days and weeks.

We are currently focusing our efforts on three main directions. The first one is humanitarian support. Two weeks ago, we had already tripled our aid to Gaza. Today, I can announce that we are further increasing the humanitarian aid to Gaza by another EUR 25 million. By doing so, the European Union would spend a total of EUR 100 million in humanitarian aid for civilians in Gaza. At the same time, we are working with Israel, Egypt, and the United Nations to let more convoys into Gaza, including through corridors and pauses for humanitarian needs. Aid is now entering through the Rafah border crossing. But the volumes remain too small to match the massive humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our priority is to work with partners to reinforce Rafah's logistic capacities. At the same time, we are working on complementary routes. A maritime corridor from Cyprus, for example, that would guarantee a sustained, regulated and robust flow of aid. I very much welcome the excellent cooperation with President Nikos Christodoulides and his government. Our Union is the largest humanitarian donor to Gaza and we will keep pushing for our aid to reach civilians in need. This can make the difference between life and death for thousands of Palestinians. And we will continue our efforts to help evacuate EU citizens and injured Palestinians.

My second point is on hostages. Of course, Member States are leading the efforts to bring all hostages to safety. This is one of the greatest hostage crises in Europe's history, and also for many non-European countries. All of them must make it home to their loved ones. And we will support Member States in every possible way. Every single hostage matters. Their captors should free them, and should free them now.

My third point is: We must do everything in our power to avoid a regional conflict. The risk of a spillover is real. But an escalation is not inevitable. It will require joint efforts and joint visions for the future by the United States, the European Union, Arab countries, of course the United Nations, and others to achieve this. Today, I would like to thank especially those among you who are posted to the region for your tireless work to contain the escalation. I know, it is going to be hard. That is why we need all your support to find a way forward. This outreach to regional capitals will be even more important in the coming weeks. I know you have already done a tremendous work. But we have to go on and we have to have a long breath.

Tomorrow, I will welcome King Abdullah of Jordan to Brussels, to offer all our support to this country, as we are doing, of course, right now already. And yesterday I spoke to President al-Sisi of course also to exchange on the situation and how we can support Egypt in these difficult times. And at the same time, and that is important, we have to work on normalisation between Israel and its neighbours. And this normalisation can and must continue. We all know that Hamas wanted to destroy this historic rapprochement. But the rapprochement is not only historic, it also brings lots of hope and economic prosperity to the region, so it is very tangible. An example, just two months ago, you might perhaps recall, we signed in Delhi, I would say, the most ambitious project of our generation. It is the Europe-Middle East-India Economic Corridor. Just think about it, this corridor will be the most direct connection that we have to date between Europe, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and then India. Just think about this, rail, data, electricity and green hydrogen, and all of them working together. These are the state-of-the-art connections of the world of tomorrow. It is not only a fascinating economic bridge, this is the case too. It is also a bridge most importantly between people, between cultures, of course between civilizations. And if it works, it will bring along new connections. And you also know it, new connections bring new friendships. And this could bring a common perspective to a very troubled region.

Millions of people all across the world feel that the Middle East is stuck in a spiral of endless conflict where violence only leads to more violence. But this does not have to be the case.

As we deal with the urgency of today, we must also make the effort to think about tomorrow. And I know all of you as allies to imagine what a lasting peace may look like. And, even in these times, to restore hope for Palestinians and Israelis. And for this, they need a perspective. And the perspective is the two-state solution. Of course, in the end, Israelis and Palestinians, they have to agree on the way forward. But I believe, we, as part of the international effort, must also contribute, we have a role to play by putting forward some basic principles, for example for the day after the war, that could help find common ground. Let me elaborate a little bit on this one.

First of all, Gaza can be no safe haven for terrorists. We know what happened after the previous Gaza wars. Hamas immediately started rebuilding its arsenal and preparing for the next conflict. This cannot be the case any longer. Different ideas are being discussed on how this can be ensured, including an international peace force under UN mandate.

Second, this implies that the terrorist organisation Hamas cannot control or govern Gaza. There should be only one Palestinian Authority, and one Palestinian State.

Third, there can be no long-term Israeli security presence in Gaza. Gaza is an essential part of any future Palestinian State.

Fourth, very important, no forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza. This would only be a recipe for more regional instability.

And finally, no sustained blockade of Gaza. This policy has not worked. Hamas has continued to build up its arsenal, while the economy of Gaza has collapsed, so it is just the opposite of what we want. 70% of young people in Gaza are jobless. And this can only lead to more radicalisation, we all know it here in the room. Any future Palestinian State must be viable, also from an economic point of view. And Europe stands ready to work with all people and countries in this region to make this happen. Excellencies, all of this may be or may look overly ambitious, as the war still rages on. But I think we must spare no effort to keep the hope alive. To find a lasting solution, based on two states, living side by side in peace and security. It is again time for an international effort towards peace in the Middle East. And we will play our part.

Dear Ambassadors,

I started by saying that the conflicts in Europe, the Middle East or Africa should not mask the other challenges we face – whether linked to climate or digital, trade or economic security. In fact, this instability should make us focus our minds on the key relationships we have across the world. 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. In these turbulent times, there is strong need for strategic stability in how we deal with China. We must get China right. We must recognise that there is an explicit element of rivalry in our relationship. The Chinese Communist Party's clear goal is a systemic change of the international order, of course with China at its centre. We have seen it with China's positions in multilateral bodies, which show its determination to promote an alternative vision of the world order.

But this rivalry can be constructive, not hostile. And this is why we need functioning channels of communication and high-level diplomacy. This is what I have called de-risking through diplomacy. And this is why we have invested in intensive dialogue with Beijing – from four High-Level Dialogues now to the upcoming EU-China Summit that we will have in a couple of weeks. Cooperation with China on global issues is possible and is happening. We see it also in the fight against climate change. There is room to define together common rules and solutions to challenges we all share. But working in the confines of the rules-based system also means respecting it across the board. For instance, the rules of the WTO matter as much as other multilateral rules, like the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. And today we must recognise that China's views on the 'global security architecture' are not by default aligned with ours. Think about Ukraine. China says it upholds the UN Charter. But it does not distance itself from Russia's war of aggression. The way forward is to keep engaging with Beijing so that the support to Russia remains as limited as possible. But also to make clear – and that is important – that the way China positions itself on Russia's war will, of course, define our mutual relationship.

The same is true for other theatres – which are increasingly linked. China states that it is impartial and favours peaceful solutions, while enabling and supporting some of the world's most destabilising forces. And yet, China and Europe have a shared interest in stability in the Middle East. So every measure of influence that Beijing has on Hamas and on Iran needs to be used to prevent further escalation. They have to play their role. And if we widen our lens, we are watching very closely the situation in the South China Sea. They affect not just our partners in the region, such as the Philippines, but of course our global interests. China's actions impact our security, our sovereignty and our prosperity. And we have to be very frank on this, as a foundation for a constructive relationship.

We must also be clear-eyed on how China's global posture is changing. We see a strong push to make China less dependent on the world, and the world more dependent on China. Geopolitics and geoeconomics cannot be seen as separate anymore. By now China is our most important trading partner in terms of goods – we should not forget that. But at the same time, concerns about unfair and at times predatory practices distorting our own Single Market are absolutely tangible and rising – measurable. For instance, China has often resorted to trade coercion, boycotts of European goods, and export controls on critical raw materials. This shows that while we do not want to decouple from China, we do need to de-risk parts of our relationship. 'De-risk, not decouple' is by now a strategy accepted by all major Western partners.

Part of the work has to happen here in the Europe Union. And we have already come quite a long way. Think about our new trade defence instruments. Or our investigation on Chinese electric vehicles. But the global dimension of de-risking is just as important. Our approach has found broad support from key partners – from Japan to Canada, from the United States to Australia. And

countries all around the world want to work with Europe. That is good news. Some of them are also overly dependent themselves on a single country for essential supply chains. They care about their own economic security, just like we care about ours. Others, for example, want to develop local industries for processing and refining, instead of just shipping their resources abroad. So, there are multiple interests to work with us. And Europe's offer is truly unique with clear, very precise and transparent benefits for both sides. This is the heart of Global Gateway, our new way to partner with third countries abroad.

We just had the recent Global Gateway Forum, for instance. We have signed there a number of impressive new projects across the world. We have now 92 flagship projects that we are pursuing across the world. A few examples: take the Trans-African Corridor. It will not only connect landlocked regions in the DRC and Zambia to global markets, but it will also invest in local value chains, and in skills for the local workforce. Or take our investment roadmap with Namibia, to develop a local industry for green hydrogen and critical raw materials. Our business plan is so attractive that countries from Colombia to Kazakhstan, from Mauritania to Vietnam, are now all asking to work with us on similar projects – so word is spreading, that is good. These are all investments in prosperity for our partners, of course at eyes' level, but as well in the European economic security and in our own prosperity. As Team Europe, and that is the difference, we have the size and the financial power to bring about real change. And we are finally making use of our massive economic assets in a much more strategic way.

Dear Ambassadors,

Whether we face a rogue Russia, a boiling Middle East or a fragmented global economy, the core of Europe's response must stay the same. We need to act together, aligning our interests and our values. Because what happens to democracy and freedom, peace and security, in one part of the world, of course directly affects the lives of Europeans here in our European Union. We have a lot we can draw on. Europe's greatest strength lies in the diversity of the assets we can mobilise. From aid to trade, from sanctions to investments – you just name it. And you, the Ambassadors, play such a central and crucial role. Our Delegations are the hubs of our external action. In a world where size and weight does matter, we must put the full force of our Union at the service of our values: peace, security and prosperity.

Let me thank you all for your dedicated service to our Union. And let me wish you an excellent Ambassadors week here in Brussels.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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