

Speech: Acting with Unity

Thank you very much Mr President. I wanted to start by apologising for my absence at the start of this debate. I left the chamber to go to a Remembrance service for the hundredth anniversary of the end of World War I. I think it's very good and thank China that we're having this debate day so close to that anniversary, which started the march to multilateralism in earnest, even though some foundations had been laid in the previous century. And of course the end of World War II saw the creation of the United Nations and the United Nations be the apex of the [rules-based international] system that, on the whole, has kept us all safe and prosperous since 1945.

I wanted too to say at the outset how grateful we are to the United States for giving the United Nations its home here in New York and for their contribution, without which many of the gains of the preceding almost 70 years could not have been made.

I'd like to speak on three themes today: One, on collective challenges; one on the particular role of the Security Council; and one on what we now need to do, in our view, to strengthen multilateralism.

In my own country, public debate on foreign policy issues nearly always features as a reference to the need for a solution to be pursued through the United Nations, no matter where on the political spectrum the comment is made from. Post-Brexit you will find the United Kingdom an even more active participant in the affairs of the UN and of global affairs more generally.

Mr President, 70 years ago no one could accuse the UN founding fathers of a lack of ambition but since its foundation, the United Nations has faced an almost unbridgeable gap between its ambition and our ability to help it deliver.

Important gains have been made. Kofi Annan spoke of pushing heavy rocks to the top of the hill, even though some had eluded our grasp and that we needed to keep going. What I wanted to stress Mr President was that whatever country's economic or security model, all the evidence shows that countries thrive best if they have open societies, if they pursue open trade, open speech, open association and open information.

A rules-based international system which preserves stability is in the interests of the vast majority of the member states of this organisation but, as many of you have identified today, we face a proliferation of threats from many quarters. We have heard a lot of reference to those today. Some of them have been the cause of great dispute in this Council but they are all relevant to the entire membership, whether you are on the Council, electing a member of the Council or standing for election yourself. No nation can protect its people without engaging positively in the crises that affect the world. I cannot see a single major threat that can be solved by one nation alone, whether it's migration, cybercrime, modern day slavery, terrorist threats, disease or climate change. All these threats challenge security and

prosperity at home and they challenge collective security. They can be resolved only by collective action on the world's stage.

But effective collective action Mr President, can not only mean action by consensus. Threats to international peace and security, by their nature, often involve a challenge to international law and norms. It logically cannot be the case that action to uphold international peace and security must always be by consensus; that will not be sufficient.

You, Mr President, spoke of the need for the Security Council to act with unity, wisdom and courage. Our collective wisdom tells us that inaction in the face of gross abuses of human rights and violations of international law – acts of genocide, acts of using prohibited weapons – [like chemical weapons] – leads to disastrous outcomes and hence we fail to uphold international peace and security because we lack the courage to act on the wisdom we display. We end up being disunited.

From Rwanda to Srebrenica, to current conflicts in Myanmar and Syria, we are failing the cause of multilateralism by failing to act in line with the Charter. The United Nations Security Council was invested with powers under Chapter VII of the Charter in order to fulfil its duties to maintain international peace and security, but if we are blocked by one or two members from using those powers, that is not a legitimate expression of the Charter but an abuse of the power of the veto.

Mr President, we completely share the views of those Security Council members who spoke about the importance of Chapter VI and Chapter VIII of the Charter relating to the Security Council. To that I would also add Article 99 which we believe is underused – the ability of the Secretary-General to draw matters to the Security Council's attention.

But I want to stress Mr President that under Chapter VI, the Security Council may investigate any dispute or any situation that may give rise to a dispute and may determine whether or not it constitutes international friction and endangers the maintenance of international peace and security. The Charter does not require the Security Council already to agree that such a threat exists, and it is our view Mr President that the more some countries try and stifle Security Council discussion of these situations under Chapter VI- for example, when a government is attacking its own people or abusing its neighbours – the more likely it is, if Chapter VI is stifled, that more dramatic action will be needed eventually under Chapter VII. That's an irony Mr President, that I think the Security Council should do well to reflect on.

A rules-based international system Mr President must, of course, adapt to thrive. It must even adapt if it wants to survive. A number of speakers today have called attention to the importance of supporting reform, and I would like to add the UK's voice that as well, and I would say that that includes Security Council reform.

I think we must also redouble our efforts to defend the rules-based international order. We need multilateral organizations that are fit for purpose. We need to reform outdated and bureaucratic structures. This is the

best way to make sure that the institutions do not collapse. We need WTO reform so that we succeed in warding off the dangerous temptations of protectionism and we need World Bank reform so that its governance reflects the changing balance of the global economy. We need to strengthen the invisible chain that links democracies and we must also ensure though, at the same time, that we are better at acting in concert when we face real and present threats.

[I have two difficult messages for member states today. The first is that the rules-based international system requires us all to uphold it; we cannot pick and choose the rules we would like to adhere to. Secondly, we must collectively but robustly confront that minority of states who defy this collective will. If you use chemical weapons, and a UN investigation finds that you have done so, we cannot sit in this Chamber and talk about the importance of multilateral solutions without talking about it. Sovereignty isn't a license to play fast and loose with international rules and norms; it isn't a license to abuse and attack your own people; it isn't a license to annex other people's territory. The P5 have a particular role in this regard, whether your preferred reading is President Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Stan Lee: with great power comes great responsibility.]

Mr President, we would see one of the most important things as a renewed commitment from all members of the Council but also all members of the General Assembly, a more a stronger commitment to responsibility and partnership from both state and non-state actors – civil society, the private sector. It is all about what we can do together as we move towards the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations in 2020.

The SDGs are the most supreme, if you like, manifestation of this goal. And this goal is all the more important as we grapple with new and disruptive technologies, like artificial intelligence and cyber which will change the way governments interact with each other and with their own citizens.

So while the United Kingdom Mr President strongly agrees with the premise of this debate, we know that we must be vigilant against the tendency of this subject to become an exercise in mutual adoration. In conflicts, atrocities are committed and international laws are breached. An increase in the use of multilateralism should never be coded language for negotiating agreements with those who have violated the rules of our international system.

Thank you Mr President.

[Please note: remarks in square brackets were in the original version of this statement but were not delivered in the Council].