

Speech: PM statement at UNSC counter-proliferation event: 26 September 2018

Mr President, thank you for convening this important debate. There is no greater threat to international peace and security than the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

These issues matter to every man, woman and child around the globe.

And the United Kingdom, like the other Permanent Members of this Council, has a special responsibility to protect the significant gains we have made in the last 70 years.

Because the international community has invested huge energy into containing the horrific forces that emerged in the 20th Century.

The multilateral framework of treaties countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is one of the greatest achievements of the international community, demonstrating the value of global cooperation.

It has improved all of our security. It has brought a measure of predictability and stability. And it has paved the way to arms control agreements and disarmament.

When many of us around this table were born it was feared dozens of Nuclear-Weapon States might emerge. Instead, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons has seen a remarkable near-30 states abandon their pursuit of nuclear weapons. Global stockpiles have been reduced by close to 80% since their Cold War peak. That is true success, on a truly global scale.

Similar – if not greater – success has been achieved on chemical and biological weapons. Over 96% of declared stockpiles of chemical weapons have now been destroyed under international verification. And no country professes publicly to possess biological weapons.

But the last 18 months have seen these hard-won gains challenged.

We have seen chemical weapons used in Syria, Malaysia and the UK. The conventions governing our nuclear compact are being picked at. Predictability and stability are declining. If we do not increase our collective efforts to preserve and build on what we have, there is a very real risk these gains will subside or fall away.

The 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty is rightly perceived as the flagship of the international community's determination against nuclear proliferation.

Supporting it requires leadership. Leadership of the sort your administration – and you personally, Mr President – are demonstrating on DPRK, the world's most pressing nuclear threat.

In meeting Kim Jong Un, you have created an historic opportunity for complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation.

Consensus from this Council to impose sanctions on DPRK has played no small part.

But we will not continue meaningful progress towards peace on the Korean Peninsula without sustained pressure. Sanctions must be strictly enforced by all, including the DPRK's neighbours. We must stay vigilant.

Ensuring non-proliferation also requires collective leadership, of the type that led to the agreement in 2015 of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the Iran nuclear deal.

For many years, the scale and nature of Iran's nuclear programme raised serious international concerns. The JCPOA was an important step forward in addressing these. It remains the best means of preventing Iran developing a nuclear weapon, and we are committed to preserving the JCPOA as long as Iran continues to abide by its obligations in full. Iran must ensure they implement their obligations fully. And to monitor Iran's compliance, we strongly support the IAEA using inspections and other monitoring provisions of the JCPOA to their full.

Other aspects of Iran's policies, in particular its destabilising regional behaviour and sustained efforts to enhance its ballistic missile capability, continue to cause serious concerns. The international community, and, where appropriate, the Security Council, need to be ready to address this.

And Iran's proliferation of missile and sophisticated military technology to groups like Hizbollah in Lebanon or, as the UN's Panel of Experts concluded, the Houthis in Yemen, is also not in compliance with Security Council Resolutions.

It risks a dangerous escalation. So we need to see further decisive action in this Council to tackle both the transit and proliferation of these technologies, and increase the costs for those responsible.

It is regrettable that Russia continues to prevent the Council from upholding its responsibility to stop this destabilising activity.

Mr President, nowhere are the grim consequences of the erosion of global norms on Weapons of mass destruction more apparent than in Syria, where the UN has concluded that Asad's regime has repeatedly used chemical weapons, a direct assault on a near-century old ban vital to our collective peace and security. Yet Russia has repeatedly wielded its veto to prevent the Security Council from holding the Asad regime to account, even shutting down the international body established to investigate chemical weapons use in Syria.

So I welcome the decision of 150 countries in June – the largest gathering in its history – to empower the OPCW to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Syria and to put in place arrangements for attribution for any country which requests it.

And I would like to thank the President and President Macron for their determination for joint military action in April 2018.

This decision also sent a clear message to the Assad regime: perpetrators of chemical weapons use cannot escape identification. The regime's backers must use their influence to ensure chemical weapons are not used again. For there must be no doubt: we will respond swiftly and appropriately if they are.

The UK saw the consequences of these norms being eroded in Salisbury this year, when Russia recklessly deployed a nerve agent on our streets. The United Kingdom has presented detailed evidence, clearly laid out in charges of attempted murder and the use and possession of a chemical weapon against two agents of the Russian state. We have taken appropriate action, with our allies, and we will continue to take the necessary steps to ensure our collective security. Russia has only sought to obfuscate through desperate fabrication.

Permanent Members of the UN Security Council must not attack and undermine the international non-proliferation regimes and the institutions that underpin them. All members of the Council must fulfil their responsibilities to safeguard them, in support of international peace and security.

It is my sincere hope that Russia will rejoin the international consensus against the use of chemical weapons, and the collective effort to uphold it. If so, this Council will again be able to work together to rid the world of chemical weapons. But if not, we should leave no-one in any doubt of the international community's determination to uphold international non-proliferation regimes.

Not all the challenges faced by the counter-proliferation framework come before this Council, but they are no less urgent. We need to strengthen the rules to keep pace with new technologies and more complex global supply chains. We must help every UN member to develop their capabilities and regulation, and ensure they are able to make their contribution to this global effort.

The quiet but essential role the United Nations plays must be at the heart of these efforts. So as UN members, we should invest the expertise and diplomatic resources necessary in the Conventions.

Mr President, it was collective engagement by states across the globe that produced the counter-proliferation framework. Even the most powerful recognised that investing in collective rules-based restraint was the only effective way of addressing national security interests and avoiding unilateral recourse to force.

We cannot let the framework be undermined today by those who reject the values and disregard the rules that have kept us safe. It will take collective engagement to reinforce it in the face of today's challenges. And in this, as has always been the case, the UK will play a leading role.