

Prime Minister Robert Abela addresses the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Secretary General,
President,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Dear friends.

When we gathered this time last year, little could we have predicted that - just a couple of weeks later - our world would be plunged into even greater turmoil by the despicable attacks of October 7th.

In the twelve months since, we have seen continued loss of life and a humanitarian emergency on such a scale that it is all too easy to give up hope. All too easy to believe that nothing can be done. All too easy to turn the other cheek.

We cannot escape from the stark reality that our world faces the gravest of challenges, and the populations of far too many of these United Nations face the gravest perils. The gravity of those threats is such that we – as leaders from across the globe – are confronted with a choice of two paths. We can choose the path of despair – dejectedly deciding that is simply impossible to make a difference or we can choose the path of persistence.

Determined that, no matter how rough the waters, we can, and we must redouble our efforts to meet those challenges and mitigate those perils. I emphatically believe that we have a moral responsibility to take the path of persistence.

I will never apologize for reaffirming the simple belief that motivated me to come into public life, that tomorrow can be better than today. And no matter what the headwinds, it is a belief that still motivates all I do. I refuse to believe that we should just give up. I refuse to listen to those siren whispers that the worst is inevitable, and it is not worth working for better outcomes. I refuse to give into the notion that we can defer difficult decisions, or that small countries just have to passively accept the actions of larger players.

To acquiesce to that negativity would be to accept that this General Assembly, that this United Nations is nothing more than a counsel of despair. To that I say a resounding no. This United Nations can and must be a counsel of hope. Nobody is going to pretend that we can wave any sort of magic wand or deliver instant solutions. But we have a duty to keep hope alive, to keep trying, to keep working. To keep battling for the values that were the very foundation of the idea of a United Nations.

Eight decades ago – from the rubble of the first truly global conflict – our forerunners had the courage and the foresight to see that the world had to have a forum where the voice of every nation could be heard. And as colonialism rightly crumbled, there were to be a lot of newly independent nations to add their signatures to the Charter. Malta is one such nation. As we gained our independence from the United Kingdom, we took our place in the world. This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of Malta's accession to the United Nations. Over those six

decades, my country has developed beyond the wildest dreams of the pioneers who saw us to statehood.

So, as we mark 60 years of Malta as a proud member of the United Nations, and as the UN itself gets ready to mark its 80th anniversary, my message is clear. The world needs the United Nations now more than ever. Malta values the United Nations now more than ever. And make no mistake – Malta may be a small country, but we will always be a loud voice against deferring difficult decisions and avoiding difficult conversations. We will never resign ourselves to a future devoid of peace. We will never abandon our commitment to supporting peace processes – no matter how tough those processes may be.

We will remain steadfast in our support for steps to build and maintain peace in every region of conflict. We will remain as committed to – and confident in – this United Nations as that day in December sixty years ago when the ink dried on Malta's signature.

Malta has a unique political and geographical position. At the heart of the Mediterranean, a bridge between Europe and North Africa, and the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. A full member of the EU, but with neutrality enshrined in our constitution. We are acutely aware of the responsibility this position brings. Two words sum-up the role I believe Malta can and does play. Honest broker. From hosting peace talks, to brokering difficult dialogues, we aim to harness our position to bring those in conflict together to at least try and find a way forward.

This is exactly the approach Malta has brought to our membership of the Security Council over the past two years. And that is exactly the approach we have brought to the Chair of the OSCE which we assumed in January. Malta was happy to step-up and take the Chair as an honest broker – allowing all members to endorse our leadership, and ensuring the work of this vital body can continue. Like Malta, the OSCE is a bridge between neighbours across continents.

Europe can only be secure, and at peace, if its neighbours are secure and at peace. Which is why – both in the Security Council and in the OSCE – our guiding watchwords are always promoting Sustainability, Peace and Security. This approach sits well alongside the OSCE's comprehensive conception of security as not just about ending military conflict, but also addressing the social and economic tensions that create and exacerbate international tensions. To that end we will continue to press for all nations to comply with the Arms Trade Treaty. The failure of too many countries to comply with international rules poses too great a threat to too many innocent citizens.

President, as I've reflected on my country's six decades of membership of this United Nations - I've looked back at the wisdom of some of those who have held the office of Secretary General. Sadly, these words of Ban Ki Moon remain as true and urgent today as ever: *"The world is over-armed, and peace is under-funded."*

The peace and humanitarian budgets - which are at the heart of the UN's mission - remain severely underfunded, harshly impacting too many of the world's most vulnerable people. Which is why Malta urges all member states to play their part by remitting the resources to

ensure the hard-working, hard-pressed frontline UN staff can play their part in bringing relief and hope where it is so desperately needed.

As Malta concludes its current term on the Security Council, I am proud of what we have been able to help achieve. Amidst the tragedy of events in Israel and Gaza we have worked with others to prioritize the relief of humanitarian suffering.

We used our seat on the Security Council to work for Resolution 2712, which demanded urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and the provision of corridors through Gaza to supply critical supplies needed by so many civilians, not least children. The resolution also called for the release of hostages held captive by Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza. We are proud that this led to the release of 105 hostages during the negotiated seven-day pause.

Similarly, I am pleased Malta played a key role in the Security Council adopting Resolution 2728 – which demanded an immediate ceasefire in Gaza for the month of Ramadan, alongside the immediate release of all hostages. This was the first joint motion from the non-permanent members on a geographic situation in the Security Council's history.

Understandably, much of the world's attention has been on Israel/Gaza since October 7th, which has now expanded to a dangerous and deeply worrying escalation in Lebanon. We stand firm in our belief that we must all strive to ensure that the flames of this conflict do not engulf the whole region, and that we all take decisive steps to resolve this conflict before it is too late.

Furthermore, it is imperative that we, as a global community, do not lose focus on those other parts of the world where war and the killing of civilians is also all too present, and all too tragic, a daily reality. Sudan, Yemen, Syria and, of course, Ukraine.

So, let me turn to another country in conflict. Malta's southern neighbour – Libya. Helping the Libyan people achieve a genuine and lasting resolution to the institutional crisis - for which they have paid too high a price for too long – is a key priority for Malta. For such a resolution would not only benefit the Libyan people, but it would also benefit all Libya's neighbours and the wider region. Only with a single functioning government - supported by citizens across the whole country - can Libya play its full part in addressing the migrant crisis which puts so many lives at risk.

Which is why Malta warmly welcomes the initiatives taken by UNS-MIL in bringing the parties together to sign an agreement that will hopefully end a crisis at the Central Bank of Libya; and also to kickstart the stalled wider political process. Malta will continue to stand ready to do anything it can to aid that process, and we will be unstinting in advocating for proactive engagement by the international community to support and enhance these UN led efforts. Together we have a duty to aid the mediation needed to create a pathway towards national parliamentary and presidential elections in Libya.

As friends and neighbours of Libya, we can and must help. But for the process to truly succeed, it must be Libyan led and Libyan owned. To which end, we unequivocally call for the immediate

withdrawal of all foreign forces, fighters and mercenaries from Libya. And Malta re-emphasises the need for a full implementation of the Libyan arms embargo in line with all the relevant Security Council resolutions.

Equality is a key value for my government and my country. Just as the situation in Libya will only be resolved by all the people of the country knowing they have an equal voice, so are so many of the conflicts, disputes and tensions around the world fuelled by inequality. Equality isn't some sort of added extra – nice to have but not vital to tackling the world's problems. That view couldn't be more misguided. Equality – across gender, race, religion, age, disability, sexuality – is not just imperative for its own sake. Equality is also imperative in finding lasting solutions to so many of the challenges that face us all.

So, I am honoured Malta stands at the forefront of promoting civil liberties globally. We are one of the few countries that has already implemented an Anti-Racism Strategy, and now we are in the process of drafting a second, renewed Anti-Racism Strategy. We will never take equality at home for granted, and we will always advocate and support greater equality internationally. All too often, it is women and girls who bear the brunt of conflict, and all too infrequently are the voices of women and girls heard when it comes to solving those conflicts. Without women, there can be no peace. As the world redoubles its efforts to bring peace, so must we all redouble our efforts to ensure the voice of women and girls is heard, at the top tables, as well as on the ground.

During our term on the Security Council, Malta has worked hard to do just that. Malta has chaired the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. In the last eighteen months, the Working Group has issued conclusions on the role of children in the conflicts in South Sudan, Nigeria, Mali, Afghanistan, CAR, Colombia, Iraq and Somalia. That list is a sad testament to the magnitude and gravity of the repeated violations against children in crisis zones. We must never let up in our outrage and action at these persistent and flagrant abuses of the rights of the child – as enshrined by this United Nations.

President, we have a saying in Maltese: Il-bahar sinjur. The sea is wealthy. And indeed it is. As an island nation, for Malta, the wealth of the sea equates to the wealth of our people. The health of the sea equates to the health of our people. So we need no reminder just how essential it is to protect the wealth, health and bio-diversity of the earth's seas and oceans. And we know just how much small island nations like ours will be impacted as climate change warms oceans and raises sea levels. We, small island nations, are amongst the lowest emitters of greenhouse gases, but we are literally the frontline of the climate emergency.

The impact of climate change will be felt by all our citizens. It is our duty to them to do all we can to minimise that change and maximise our resilience to the changes already being felt. Delay and prevarication simply aren't options. Climate change must remain at the top of the global agenda.

Solidarity – standing shoulder to shoulder – with our fellow small island nations is a key value for Malta. Solidarity means actions, not just words. The 'Islands for Islands' initiative is central to our foreign policy – providing concrete, practical assistance to Small Island Developing States. Sharing best practice and building capacity. That's why Malta has jointly taken the lead

in developing the 'Climate Vulnerability and Resilience Index' – a practical resource to help small islands identify and prepare for the effects of the changing climate. As sea levels become an ever greater concern so does the health of our seas and oceans become ever greater a priority. Malta remains, and will always remain, at the forefront of efforts to protect our oceans.

In the very first years of our UN membership, we were one of the foremost proponents of the principle of the Common Heritage of Mankind – thank you Arvid Pardo - and it remains our lodestar. We have consistently spoken up in the Security Council about the existential threat from rising sea levels. And Malta will always remain unwavering in our support for the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Malta welcomes the first ratifications of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement – which will provide much needed, much greater protection for the two-thirds of global oceans that lie beyond national jurisdictions. The treaty will only come into force when sixty nations have ratified it. Our oceans need it. Our peoples deserve it. So I say to my fellow leaders – speed up and sign!

To preserve healthy maritime environments we all need to take practical, innovative steps. That's why I am delighted at the success Malta's new 'Shore to Ship' initiative is having. The stunning Grand Harbour in our capital Valetta is a magnet for cruise ships. But while docked in berth, they can produce serious amounts of pollution if relying on their engines in the confined space. So 'shore to ship' is installing onshore power supply alongside the quays used by cruise ships. Meaning they can switch off their engines and help reduce pollution in this most special of places by around ninety percent.

In Malta we know that while the sea can yield great gifts, it can also be the host for illicit activity and the breaking of international laws. The high seas must never become the 'Wild West'. The rule of law and the will of the international community must always hold on sea as on land. Which is why Malta championed the creation of a unified database of all vessels involved in illicit activity – shareable and usable by all participating states.

Shipping is central to international trade, so ensuring they are fully applied at sea is central to any successful sanctions regime. And that can only happen if ship owners know that trying to break sanctions brings consequences. But it is essential – for reasons of natural justice and to ensure buy in from member states – that the listing of those breaking sanctions is fair and transparent. So Malta was proud to jointly hold the pen - alongside the United States - for resolution 2744, that overhauls the delisting process for the first time in almost two decades. By creating a better system for delisting where warranted, we can ward against premature lifting of sanctions which is not warranted.

President, we have witnessed how effective global health policies can unite nations, especially when addressing crises that transcend borders and that affect us all. Just yesterday, UN Member States adopted the Political Declaration on Antimicrobial Resistance, which has been diligently facilitated by Malta and Barbados over many months. AMR presents a collective threat that demands our urgent attention. We know what must be done to prevent the loss of millions of lives and to avert trillions of dollars in additional healthcare costs. This

Declaration should serve as a strategic roadmap for policymakers, guiding their efforts to tackle AMR in the years ahead.

President, when we reconvene in a year's time we will be marking the eightieth birthday of our United Nations. But we mustn't ever be just marking time. We need to always be marking progress.

As Dag Hammarskjöld said: *"The pursuit of peace and progress cannot end in a few years in either victory or defeat. The pursuit of peace and progress, with its trials and its errors, its successes and its setbacks, can never be relaxed and never abandoned."*

In Europe the average life expectancy is just over eighty years. The UN will only have life expectancy longer than that, if we all recommit to its future. As the saying goes, I want reports of its death to be greatly exaggerated. Yes, we can't ignore the fact that the architecture of the world's collective security is under stress like never before. Voices of nationalism dismiss the need to work together. Instigators of conflict believe they can escape the wrath and the writ of the global community. Both couldn't be more wrong. Acting to end conflict and relieve suffering is never easy. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying.

Reaching consensus across borders and across political differences is never easy. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying. Acknowledging we have all contributed to the state our world is in and setting aside pride to try and make the world a better place is never easy. But that doesn't mean we should stop trying. Arguably the temptation to 'wring hands' and see change as too hard to achieve is greatest for small nations like my own. To sit back and sigh that the big boys have made too much of a mess of things.

Well, Malta will never sit back. Malta will never wring hands. Malta will never leave it to others. Yes, Malta will always be realistic. But Malta will always be committed to multilateralism. When the perils are at their greatest - the need to work together is at its greatest.

So, let us use the next twelve months – in the run up to that eightieth anniversary, to reassert our collective belief in this United Nations, to redouble our efforts. To resolve conflict, to take the steps the future of the earth needs and to deliver the change the peoples of this planet need and deserve. To raise our game in supporting the Secretary General in delivering the institutional reform the UN needs to better fulfil its purpose.

In short – and with every fibre of my being I say to my fellow leaders: Now is the time to choose, and we must choose the Path of Persistence. We must reject the path of despair.

Yes, our world faces huge challenges and huge threats. But if we lose belief in the power of collective action, if we lose belief in the ability to work together to make a difference, then we are losing belief in the very idea of a better world.

If we fail to persist – we fail to lead. If we fail to persevere – we fail the people who put their faith in us. Failure simply isn't an option. The stakes are too high. The risks too great. The

consequences too severe. So let us make that choice. Let us today recommit as a United Nations. Let us affirm the Path of Persistence.

And – no matter how tough the going – let us enter the 80th year of this United Nations with the simple goal in our head and in our hearts. Let us – now more than ever – never give up believing that tomorrow can -and must - be better than today.

Thank you.