

Address by Prime Minister of Malta Robert Abela at the 80th United Nations General Assembly

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Dear friends,

We are gathered here just a few weeks shy of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of this United Nations.

Even a glance at the global headlines is enough to produce the depressing thought that, perhaps, it should be less of a birthday party, and more of a wake up call.

But firstly, and firmly, I want to reject the idea that the need for the United Nations is any less imperative today than it was eight decades ago.

Then, as now, you could be forgiven for losing hope.

In 1945, at the end of that global conflict, the world seemed in ruins.

Thankfully, in 2025, our world isn't in ruins, but too much of it is in flames.

Eighty years ago, the leaders owed it to the tens of millions who had lost their lives, over six years of slaughter, to never lose hope.

So do we, as leaders today, owe it to every citizen we serve to similarly never lose hope.

To never lose sight of the founding principles that brought the countries of the world together.

To never allow that which divides us, to obscure the much greater values that unite us.

To never give in to pessimism or cynicism about what the future can hold.

Now, don't misunderstand me.

I am no Pollyanna.

I am not blind to the magnitude of the challenges our world faces.

I know that fine words here in New York won't, by themselves, end conflict, hunger, or the deaths by malnutrition.

But I remain convinced that the resolution we show – and yes, the resolutions we pass here - can make a real difference on the ground.

We must never lose sight of the power of collective will, and that of collective action.

Because while the eight decades of the United Nations have seen far too much conflict and suffering.

They have also seen human progress on a scale even the most optimistic of the founding fathers, who dared to dream that working together could work to transform the lives of ordinary people, would have never imagined.

In 1945 global life expectancy – war aside – hovered in the mid-forties.

Children born this year, in 2025, can expect to live into their mid-seventies.

That didn't happen by luck or accident.

It happened by will and resolve.

It happened by effort.

And it happened also because of the positive work conducted by the agencies of this United Nations.

And it is not just in terms of life chances that the United Nations has had a transformative impact.

The values inscribed in the founding charter had a profound effect on the journey to self-determination of so many nations, like my own.

In 1945 Malta was still a colony, a British military and naval base.

In 2025 Malta is a proud republic, since 1974, playing its part at the pivotal crossroads of two continents.

So, the country I am honoured to lead will never turn its back on the possibilities that the principles of our United Nations offer to deliver solutions to even the gravest of challenges.

Perhaps, the gravest of those challenges that our world faces is division.

Barriers are being built, when they should be coming down.

And those barriers really are already proving obstacles to the exchange of trade, innovation, ideas, of hope that our world needs.

In thinking about this throwing up of barriers, I thought of some words of the late US President Ronald Reagan.

In his 1985 State of the Union address, he had said:

“There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect.”

And who can forget the four simple words which changed the course of history that President Reagan delivered two years later?

When he stood in front of the Berlin Wall and dared to say directly to the Soviet Leader:

“Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

So, I say to each and every one of my fellow leaders:

Let us tear down the walls together.

Let us dare to say the seemingly unsayable.

Let us dare to achieve the seemingly unachievable.

Let us dare to make the changes needed no matter how seemingly overwhelming the odds.

We must not be afraid to make changes closest to home – in the very way the United Nations works.

The biggest threat to the future of our United Nations doesn't come from those who want to tear it down.

But it comes from those who say that in the face of that pressure, we should barricade ourselves in and reject the idea of change and reforms.

It comes also from those who say that to admit imperfections and weaknesses in the way we work, is to give comfort to those who bemoan and belittle the very idea of the UN.

They couldn't be more wrong.

What empowers the opponents is any hint of an organisation with its head buried in sand.

A bunker mentality would be fatal.

The status quo simply isn't an option.

We need to deliver a UN that is smarter, and fairer.

And we need to accelerate the pace of change to do just that.

That change has to begin at the top.

I want to pay tribute to the Secretary General and his unwavering commitment to the cause of peace. Thank you Antonio.

But no one can say that the big-power horse trading that has marked every single election of a Secretary General has been an edifying sight.

We often reach the right outcome, and that is good, but we certainly go the wrong way about it.

We need to do better.

The process to find a worthy successor to Secretary General Guterres must be a step-change in the way we work.

The selection process needs to be transparent, inclusive, and based on merit - not political bargaining.

The decision must be taken out of the corridors of this building and become a truly global conversation. Involving all member states, as well as civil society.

As for the Security Council – its makeup reflects the world as it was in 1945, not as it is in 2025.

Malta backs the clamour for expansion, and fairer regional representation.

But it isn't just the composition that needs to change.

The role of the Security Council needs to be elevated.

It must serve as a greater counterbalance to the dominance of the larger powers.

It must be a genuine platform for all the nations of the world to have our voices heard.

And change needs to come not just to political structures, but to the way the UN works.

All around the world – including in Malta – citizens are rightly pressing governments to do more with less. Better value for money.

The UN, like any publicly funded organisation, needs to make sure that it ruthlessly focuses not on protecting the way things are done now, but on the way things can be done differently to deliver better outcomes for the same investment.

No area of the UN can remain untouched.

No vested interest left untackled.

The UN must embrace digital diplomacy for the Artificial Intelligence age.

Every system must be streamlined.

Every process scrutinised, to ensure it delivers for the front line.

Every programme assessed against its actual impact.

We shouldn't be afraid to ensure that the UN stops doing things it does badly.

And starts doing those things it does well, even better and even more efficiently.

Too often, global relations like much of life, can seem merely a numbers game.

Of course, the biggest states will always have the loudest voices. That is understandable.

But there can be no doubt that small states and developing countries are often under-represented and under-heard when key decisions are made.

Unless our unique experiences and needs are taken into account, we won't put in place solutions that can actually deliver across the whole world.

It is a self-defeating mistake for the 'big boys club' to crowd out the added value that small nations can bring to the table.

We bring innovation, credibility, and moral authority to any concerted global action.

To exclude the small, is to damage the big.

We all lose.

Which is why - although Malta may be one of the UN's smallest members in terms of geography - we have always been determined to be one of the UN's biggest voices.

Malta remains as committed to the goals of peace, dialogue, diplomacy and global cooperation as we were on that day in 1964 when we took our seat amongst these United Nations.

As we've grown as a nation, found our feet on the European and world stage, and developed a fast-growing economy, so too have we found our role in the work of the UN.

Small nations, like mine, have to be realistic about how we can add value.

But I firmly believe Malta has a combination of three factors that makes our country an asset to the global conversation.

Firstly. Malta has a deep commitment to the power of multilateral engagement.

We bring to the table the recent experience of both chairing the OSCE and serving on the Security Council.

Alongside the insight gained from our current Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

I am particularly proud that Malta's presidency coincides with the 75th anniversary of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Rising – like this United Nations – from the ashes of World War Two.

Guaranteeing, for hundreds of millions of Europeans and other peoples, the fundamental human rights for which so many people lost their lives in their fight for them.

Secondly. Malta offers a unique platform for peace.

We offer a unique mix, that leaves Malta particularly well placed to host dialogue and discussion between parties, between countries – no matter how far apart they are.

Our geography - at the crossroads of two continents.

Our neutrality - enshrined in our Constitution.

Our diplomatic tradition - as a respected and knowledgeable fair-broker.

Together, they make Malta the ideal location to come together to try and find solutions to even the most intractable of disputes.

So, today, I renew my open offer to the warring parties of the world and those working to bridge those divides.

Malta stands ready to welcome you, to facilitate, and to support you in finding ways forward.

Nobody disputes how deeply entrenched are the barriers to peace.

But that doesn't mean that the search for solutions should ever be paused.

Thinking back to President Reagan.

When he dared to call for the walls – physical and political – that were dividing Europe to be torn down.

Many dismissed it as an impossible dream.

Unrealistic.

Never going to happen.

But it did.

The seemingly intractable cold war came to an end.

As global leaders, we must equally never give up.

Never say peace can't be achieved.

Never give into defeatism, even over the most outwardly unresolvable of conflicts.

Sadly, on Malta's doorstep, two such conflicts, wars, are raging.

Ukraine and Gaza.

The world must not turn its back on either, or tackle them with double standards as this would undermine our credibility and effectiveness.

We must never wring our hands and consign any conflict to the 'too difficult to deal with' pile.

It is now three and a half years since Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Malta remains as resolute now as it was then – in demanding a lasting and just peace, that guarantees Ukraine's sovereignty.

That is the only solution which will adhere to the spirit of both the UN Charter and international law.

But that can only come about following a full and unconditional permanent ceasefire, and the full participation of Ukraine in any future peace talks and decision-taking.

Malta stands firmly with our fellow EU members in believing that we must keep the strongest possible pressure on the Russian economy to force the Russian government to see sense and engage in genuine dialogue.

Slava Ukraini.

So too must there be an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

The suffering of so many thousands of innocent civilians must come to an end. Now.

The remaining hostages must be released immediately by Hamas.

International humanitarian aid must be allowed to flow, without impediment. It is so morally wrong, and inhuman, that so many innocent people are dying of hunger and severe malnutrition.

These atrocities must stop now. We cannot allow the further killing of thousands of innocent people, babies, children, youths, the elderly and the frail to continue, and turn our heads the other way because of other improper considerations.

We cannot remain silent. Decisive and effective action needs to be taken without any further delay.

I cannot bear to see anymore the physical and psychological pain and suffering in the eyes of the children we bring over to Malta from Gaza, to give them a better future. Children with mutilated bodies who are supposed to be celebrating the innocence of their youth and the best period of their lives. The parents, who have lost their children.

And I ask – why?

When leadership should be about humanity and empathy, and not about who can inflict the maximum damage to ‘win’ a war, or wipe out a nation.

I was proud this week to stand with other world leaders and add Malta to the growing list of allies recognising Palestinian statehood. After tens of years of discussions in Malta, we took decisive action.

I owed this to Ibrahim, a fifteen year old icon of the resilience and strength of the Palestinian people. Ibrahim is now receiving the best medical care and prosthetics in Malta after having both his legs blown off and severely injured by a missile fired from a drone in Gaza.

Those are the daily realities in Gaza, and we have to stand up and be counted.

Not doing so means we are complicit in what is happening.

A viable two-state solution isn’t a ‘reward’ for Hamas.

It is the exact opposite.

It is the only way to finally banish the evil of Hamas.

It is the only solution that can deliver the sustainable and peaceful future that both peoples wish for and deserve.

Of course, the road to a fair two-state solution is a long one, fraught with difficulties.

But just because something is hard, doesn’t mean it is impossible.

The world owes to Israelis and Palestinians alike to pursue this path to peace.

Indeed, the world faces a stark choice.

In too many areas of life, too many barriers are being erected.

When too many countries pull up the shutters and turn in on themselves.

It is small island nations like Malta that pay the highest price, and take the biggest hit.

Let me be clear – security is the first duty of any government.

Being against barriers doesn't equal being against sensible safeguards.

Every nation has the right to take necessary steps to protect itself.

But isolation doesn't make anyone safer.

Because – as all the evidence of history shows – the greater the co-operation across borders, the greater the protection we can offer our citizens.

Any threat to global prosperity is a threat to global security.

So, I urge the United Nations to redouble its efforts to safeguard the connectivity that trading nations like Malta rely on.

It is incumbent on us all to resist the trend to protectionism and fight for open markets.

The alternative - of a world of trade barriers - will only make us all poorer.

Of course, it is equally important that we work to tackle the downsides of globalisation, to ensure that none of our citizens are left behind.

But there can be no turning back the clock.

We can secure our borders without building fortresses.

Addressing legitimate concerns about migration is not the same as pulling up the drawbridge.

Clearly, the current growth of irregular migration is unsustainable.

Yet, it will only be truly addressed by a truly global response.

A co-ordinated response that is both humane and sustainable.

That acknowledges the fundamental truth that migration is driven by poverty and conflict, driving migrants to risk their lives at the mercy of criminal human smugglers, in search of a better future for their families.

Every country has a right to secure borders.

But every country, equally, has a duty to play its part in tackling the causes of migration.

You might say – ‘tough on irregular migration, tough on the causes of irregular migration.’

Underpinning all this is the need for every member of this United Nations to recommit to the primacy of international law, and the value of international cooperation.

No country – however large, however strategically important – is above the rule of law.

Might does not automatically equal right.

Small states like Malta cannot afford the risks of a world where some ignore the laws when it suits them.

Upholding the Charter, upon which this United Nations was born eight decades ago, isn’t wide-eyed idealism.

For nations like Malta, it is about our very survival.

Equally vital for the survival of small island nations is the absolute necessity of stemming the impact of man-made climate change.

It would be too easy, for a world waylaid by war, to shrug its shoulders and claim it lacks the bandwidth to keep taking the actions needed to keep down our earth’s temperature.

Malta will keep working to amplify the voices of all small islands across the globe.

As a small island state, we are at the frontline of rising temperatures and rising sea-levels.

This isn’t some theoretical threat, it is a challenge to our existence.

So, Malta will continue to support indices like CORVI that bring home just how vulnerable small island states are to climate change.

And we will maintain pressure for greater support to be given to those developing small island states, where the threat is highest and fastest, but the cost of preparedness disproportionately high.

They must be given the resources they need to adapt. And the adaptation must not cause a financial burden to our citizens, otherwise we will lose their buy-in.

And, whilst reaching our climatic targets should of course not be put on the back-burner, the competitiveness of our economies must also not be put on the back-burner in the pursuit of these targets. Otherwise we will miss the wood for the trees.

Dear friends,

Let me conclude my remarks where I began.

Yes, our world faces unprecedented challenges.

In an age of instant communication, we are all exposed to the threats we all face like never before.

They can seem utterly overwhelming.

But as a world we face two choices.

We can give up hope, give up trying.

Or we can double down.

Step-in and Step-up.

And never give up.

Multilateralism is more important today than it was even in 1945.

We won't keep our peoples safe, our planet protected, or our prosperity preserved unless we work together, listen to each other, and act in concert.

So, I say to my fellow leaders, of all states, of all sizes:

Tear down these walls.

Let us stop erecting new barriers.

Let us knock down those existing walls – physical and metaphorical – that are standing in the way of progress.

No more posturing.

A lot more partnership.

We owe it to those who had the vision eighty years ago.

We owe it to the people who put their trust in us to lead.

The UN isn't perfect.

But it is indispensable.

So, let us commit loud and clear to making it better.

Better focused.

Better value.

Better at tackling the challenges of the next eighty years.

And let that commitment start today.