

**Statement by
H.E. Ms. Penny Wong
Minister for Foreign Affairs
to the UN General Assembly
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President, it is my honour to speak on behalf of Australia in this venerated General Assembly Hall that signifies so much to the world's peoples.

This remains the only place where the whole world has agreed to come together –

Recognising that we can only solve our biggest problems together –

Recognising that progress and development are preconditions for peace –

Recognising that to avoid conflict, we must talk to each other – and we must listen to each other.

It is my honour to speak on behalf of a country that is home to people from more than 300 different ancestries and to the oldest continuous culture on the planet.

Like this hall, Australia is an assembly of the world's peoples.

When Australians look out to the world, we see ourselves reflected in it.

Equally, the world can see itself reflected in Australia.

A nation whose people share common ground with so many of the world's peoples.

A nation where half our people were born overseas or have a parent born overseas.

I am one of those people.

And the Australian Parliament I serve in is ever more reflective of our modern nation, both enriched by their diversity.

This follows the collective decision of the Australian people to turn the page and write a new future for themselves.

Newly elected parliamentarians have origins from across the world, and Indigenous Australians have been elected in record numbers - and serve in the Ministry in record numbers.

The new Australian Government is determined to make real progress on the national journey of healing with Indigenous Australians, the First Peoples of our continent.

As Foreign Minister, I am determined to see First Nations perspectives at the heart of Australian foreign policy, and this week I have been encouraged by discussions with other countries on their own journeys.

I am humbled to be guided in these efforts by First Nations colleagues. Here in New York I am joined by Senator Patrick Dodson.

To many Australians, Senator Dodson is the Father of Reconciliation.

Senator Dodson is a Yawuru man from Broome, in the remote north-west of Australia.

Like many First Nations people, he walks in two worlds: as a Senator and leader in our Parliament; and as an elder, native title holder and ceremony man for his people.

In our Government, Senator Dodson has been tasked with responding to a call from First Nations people for a constitutionally enshrined Voice to the Australian Parliament, as well as treaty and truth-telling.

With daunting challenges facing the world, we have much to learn from First Nations peoples – both at home and in international fora.

Elevating First Nations voices – including right here – has never been more important.

Our nation's history and present show that like anything human, indeed like this institution in which we gather, we are not perfect.

But we aim ever higher. And we look to make our contribution to the world.

Australians see our country as it is, we see the world as it is, and we seek to shape them for the better.

Sharing common ground with so many of the world's peoples means Australians want to see the interests of all the world's peoples upheld, along with our own.

This aim of today's Australia accords with the ambition of an Australian who helped shape the UN's Charter, our former foreign minister and the third President of this General Assembly, Dr Herbert Evatt.

At the 1945 San Francisco Conference where the Charter was written, Evatt challenged the great powers. They wanted a strong Security Council that had control over the General Assembly.

Dr Evatt did not succeed in his fight against the great powers' veto within the Security Council, but he did succeed in ensuring that the General Assembly has the ability to decide its own course, and can address any matter that falls within the UN Charter or the powers and functions of any of its organs.

He understood that small and medium countries cannot simply allow their fates to be decided by the great powers.

He understood that small and medium countries must be able to maintain their sovereign choices, protected by a stable framework of rules.

And he understood that in order to maintain those sovereign choices, the small and medium countries of the world, including Australia, must work together.

These are legacies we renew today.

Dr Evatt also saw economic and social security as the precondition for peace.

He pressed the San Francisco Conference to ensure the UN addresses the broadest range of social, economic and human rights issues, saying:

"Real stability... can only be achieved by building an organisation that will do its utmost to assure the peoples of the world a full opportunity in living in freedom from want as well as in freedom from external aggression."

Some didn't want to extend the UN's ambit to economic and social development. On behalf of Australia, Evatt insisted.

And again, these are legacies Australia renews today.

Despite inheriting the biggest debt in our nation's history, the new Australian Government is determined to play its part in supporting the development of other nations – particularly in our region.

We are alarmed that for the first time, the UN's Human Development Index has declined for two consecutive years, in 2020 and 2021.

The impact of this decline has been most severe on women and girls, with nearly half a billion women and girls now living in extreme poverty.

And the global food security crisis is increasingly grave. More than 800 million people go to bed hungry every night. 345 million people face acute food insecurity. 50 million people across 45 countries are on the brink of famine.

This is a growing scale of human suffering that threatens untold global instability.

Australia is increasing our contribution to development assistance by over a billion dollars.

If we are ever to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, which represent our collective vision for minimum living standards for everyone living on this planet, every country needs to do more.

Over the coming months, we are designing a new development policy, outlining how we will play our part in a world in an era of crisis – and how we will help developing countries without driving them into unsustainable debt.

The world has experienced disasters and conflict in the past. But the intensity and confluence of today's challenges in an interconnected world are without precedent.

COVID-19 has set back development gains.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has unleashed further suffering and made it harder for populations to recover from the pandemic.

Drought and potential famine in the Horn of Africa. Major floods in Pakistan. Record-breaking heatwaves in Europe and Asia. The alarm bells of climate change growing louder, including in my own country.

Australians are clear that they want urgent and serious action, and they have given their Government a mandate.

Among the first acts of the new Australian Government has been to submit our ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and we have just passed legislation that makes these targets law.

Our climate policies mean that within this decade, 83 per cent of Australia's energy supply will be renewable.

We want to help the global energy transition. Australia will be a renewable energy superpower.

And while we are playing our part to reduce our own emissions, we are working in our region to support Pacific countries which have the most to lose from the changing climate.

Nothing is more central to the security and economies of the Pacific than climate change. As Pacific leaders themselves put it plainly in the first article of the 2018 Pacific Island Forum's Boe Declaration on Regional Security:

We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement.

Australians are part of the Pacific family.

Families are about care, love and forgiveness. But they are also about duty and loyalty, looking out for each other, and listening to each other.

The Australian people want to be better, more involved, and more helpful members of the Pacific family.

In my first months as Foreign Minister, I have visited six Pacific Islands Forum countries.

It is a clear sign of our priorities that by the end of this year I will have visited nearly all of them.

Australians want to enhance our defence, maritime and economic cooperation with Pacific Island Countries. And we want to be the Pacific's partner of choice for development and security.

We are increasing our development assistance to the Pacific by over half a billion dollars.

We are working with our Pacific partners to address our shared challenges and implement the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific.

And we want to bridge our cooperation across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, to address shared challenges, and to build the region we want.

Australia seeks deeper engagement with Southeast Asia.

It is a region I know well. It is the region I am from.

The region is being reshaped, and Australia seeks to work with our partners in ASEAN to shape this period of change together.

Australia seeks a region that is peaceful and predictable, that is governed by accepted rules and norms, where all our countries and peoples can cooperate, trade and thrive.

Where our relations are based on respect and partnership, and guided by the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

Where all states can contribute to a strategic equilibrium in a regional order in which countries are not required to choose sides, but can make their own sovereign choices.

We recognise we must bring more to the table in Southeast Asia.

This starts with an additional \$470m in development assistance, and a forthcoming strategy on economic engagement.

And we must contribute to the strategic balance of the region.

We don't want to see any one country dominating – or any country being dominated.

We cannot accept a situation where large countries determine the fate of smaller countries.

That is why Russia's illegal, immoral invasion of Ukraine cannot be normalised and it cannot be minimised.

Russia's attack on Ukraine is an attack on all smaller countries.

It is an assertion that a larger country is entitled to subjugate a smaller neighbour – to decide whether another country can even exist.

It was never intended that the Security Council veto power would be used to enable unchecked abuse of the UN charter - by the very countries that were given the veto.

So it is especially important for countries that play leading roles in international fora, and countries with influence on Russia, to exert their influence to end this war.

In this, the world looks to China, a great power, a Permanent Member of the Security Council, with a “no limits partnership” with Russia.

Mr Putin’s weak and desperate nuclear threats underline the danger that nuclear weapons pose to us all, and the urgent need for progress on nuclear disarmament.

Australia has always pursued a world without nuclear weapons, and we will redouble our efforts towards this goal - and to strengthening the non-proliferation regime.

The death and destruction in Ukraine reminds us all how much we have to lose if we fail to protect the UN Charter.

It reminds us that each nation must make its own choices, and exercise its own agency.

We cannot leave it to the big powers.

And we cannot be passive when big powers flout the rules.

Aside from terrible damage and loss of life in Ukraine, Russia’s invasion is compounding human suffering; propelling the global crisis in food and energy security.

In my own region, where geopolitical contest becomes ever sharper, we must ensure that competition does not escalate into conflict.

Because if conflict were to break out in the Indo-Pacific, it would be catastrophic – for our people and our prosperity.

And with the Indo-Pacific’s centrality to global prosperity and security, the cost would extend far beyond our region and reach into every life.

So I say to small and medium sized nations like my own: we are more than just supporting players in a grand drama of global geopolitics, on a stage dominated by great powers.

It is up to all of us to create the kind of world to which we aspire – stable, peaceful, prosperous and respectful of sovereignty.

That is the very rationale for the United Nations itself.

It is up to all of us to ask ourselves how can we each use our state power, our influence, our networks, our capabilities, to avert catastrophic conflict?

How do we acquit our responsibilities to constrain tensions - to apply the brakes before the momentum for conflict in our region or beyond becomes unstoppable?

Australia is resolved to these tasks, in all our diplomacy, in the UN and beyond.

It is why we seek a seat on the UN Security Council for 2029-2030.

It is why we seek reform of the Security Council, with greater permanent representation for the Africa, Latin America, and Asia, including India and Japan.

Being genuinely committed to the United Nations means being genuinely committed to reforming the United Nations and keeping it vital.

We know that we will always be better off in a world where rules and norms – whether on trade, the maritime domain or military engagement, on the environment or human rights – are clear, mutually negotiated and consistently followed.

History teaches us that the alternative to what we have built here is conflict and chaos.

A world where differences and disputes are settled by size and power alone, instead of by agreed rules and norms.

Humanity has benefited from the multilateral system – from the rules that have underpinned an unequalled period of human development.

Humanity will pay the price if we allow it to flounder.

Every nation, and all our peoples.

Source:

