

Statement by President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö at the 78th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 20 September 2023

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Mr President, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

More than ten years ago, when I addressed the General Assembly for the first time as President of Finland, the world seemed complicated. In the Middle East and North Africa, many nations had gone through tremendous changes following of a wave of uprisings. Europe was struggling with the deepest financial crisis of its post-war history. People around the world were affected by instability and conflicts.

Yet, in this hall, our common task was to create a constructive atmosphere. To understand each other and to find solutions to the challenges we are facing.

That is why we gather here in New York. Not only to give speeches. Not only to be seen. But to collectively ensure that our global community is moving in the right direction.

Today, as I address this body for the last time, I have to ask: have we succeeded in our task?

The world has grown even more complicated. Global tensions are running high and great power competition is accelerating. Different worldviews now seem to be on a collision course.

The topic of this session is “Rebuilding trust and reigniting global solidarity”. This must not remain empty rhetoric. We need to put these words in practice.

We all have much to gain from cooperation on equal footing.

The many global challenges we are facing – from climate change to pandemics, poverty to wars – cannot be solved by one country or group of like-minded countries alone. The opportunities presented by new technologies are also best harnessed together.

The multilateral system remains the best means to respond to the challenges faced by the international community. But that system now finds itself under pressure. As global realities have changed, many have started to question the existing structures.

As we strive to strengthen multilateral cooperation, all voices must be heard. Particularly the critical ones. Instead of rushing to judge, we need to learn to listen.

In my first speech here, I spoke of the rapid economic growth in the so called Global South and the tremendous changes it was bringing about. Those changes have been clearly visible for quite some time now. Asian, African and Latin American countries are powerful geopolitical players. The fastest growing and most populous economies of today are found in precisely those regions. That needs to be reflected in our debates.

More than one and a half years ago, Russia launched its large-scale war on Ukraine. Russia’s aggression is a direct violation of the United Nations Charter, to which we are all committed.

By aiding Ukraine, Finland, together with many others, supports Ukraine’s inherent right to self-defence. For many Finns, Ukraine’s fight for freedom carries echoes of our own history.

We, too, have fought for our freedom and independence against an enemy far greater in size and paid a high price for it. We do not want to see the world regress to a state where the big consider it their privilege to subjugate the small.

While the war is directed against Ukraine, it affects us all, both in principle and practice. It has serious consequences globally. The war in Ukraine must not become one of the many protracted conflicts we see around the world today. Peace that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is in all of our interests. It must be objective.

Finland supports Ukraine's efforts towards a just and lasting peace. But these cannot be Ukraine's efforts alone. As wide an international participation as possible is needed. It is essential that the discussions recently held in Jeddah continue. The open debate taking place today in the Security Council is also a very important opportunity to discuss and find avenues forward.

Bringing the war to a just end is essential for the Ukrainians, but it may also help to lower tensions on a wider scale.

We are witnessing the erosion of the international arms control architecture. Important treaties have been abandoned. What is left seems to be in jeopardy.

Rebuilding and strengthening arms control in the current international environment is difficult. But we have to understand that a world without mutually agreed-upon rules and transparency is an unpredictable one.

Emerging technologies are further complicating the picture. The risks are mounting. We must come together to tackle these issues.

Globally, people's sense of security has decreased to an alarming level. There are over a hundred armed conflicts ongoing worldwide. People in Afghanistan, Sudan and Yemen, and in many other countries, continue to face enormous humanitarian needs. We should not lose sight of any of these emergencies.

I commend the Secretary-General for his vision outlined in the New Agenda for Peace. We must prioritise diplomacy and make full use of the United Nations.

Finland has long underlined the importance of the universal and binding nature of human rights. Human rights need to be respected even when our societies face turmoil. In difficult times, the rights of women and girls are often eroded. We need to be decisive in safeguarding these rights.

As a member of the UN Human Rights Council, Finland works together with all stakeholders to uphold universal human rights.

No country is perfect when it comes to human rights; we can learn from each other. When one of us fails, the international community needs to ensure accountability for violations.

Earlier this week, we were rightly reminded that the lack of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals has severe implications. Both for people's lives and prosperity and for global peace and security.

This is most urgent task: to ensure a sustainable future for all life on this planet. And we are not on track. We need to take our commitments much more seriously.

If we fall behind on one goal, the effects are likely to be multiplied in other areas. Climate action is a clear example. Important steps have been taken, but more needs to be done. Any progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals will be undermined if we do not manage to cap global warming at 1.5 degrees.

Climate change and biodiversity loss are challenges that the global community cannot escape. The past summer was – yet again – the hottest on record. We have seen devastating floods, drought and wildfires in all parts of the world. We must understand that these are existential questions.

It is also important to realise that climate change does not treat us equally or fairly. Those least responsible for it are often the ones who suffer the most.

We must raise our collective ambition. New, strong commitments to reduce emissions are urgently needed. And these must be backed by swift and effective action.

As Secretary General Guterres yesterday aptly stated, the United Nations was created precisely for moments like this – moments of maximum danger and minimum agreement.

During the years that I have been attending this Assembly, we have seen tremendous challenges. We have also seen concrete efforts to make the multilateral system work better in responding to them.

Yet we often fail to deliver. We should all look to ourselves to find the root cause of these repeated frustrations. The UN is a sum of its members. It is our task to make sure this system rises to the occasion.

Mutual understanding and agreement can only be increased through dialogue and a genuine willingness to engage. None of us can afford to dismiss the concerns of the other. None of us has the right to impose our thinking or constructs on others.

We, as the global community, have to be prepared to meet each other from a position of mutual respect. And with a keen understanding of our common obligation to work together. If we do so, I am convinced that we will find we have much more in common than we have thought.

Thank you.