


Statement by President of the Republic of Finland, Alexander Stubb, at the General Debate of the 79th Session of the UN General Assembly in New York on 25 September 2024

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Madam President, Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The UN was founded 79 years ago. At the time, we were standing at a crossroads. The world had been torn apart by two world wars. Something had to be done to contain the belligerence of nation states.

We needed common institutions and rules. The mission of the United Nations was simple: to end war and to promote peace. To promote justice and a better life for the entire world. And for most of its history, it has been able to do exactly that.

I come from Finland. We are a small country in the northeastern corner of Europe. We are a peace-loving nation. Our recovery from World War II – and our rise from one of the poorest countries in Europe to one of the wealthiest and safest (and yes, happiest) countries in the world – is closely linked to the success of the United Nations.

Our ability to demonstrate dignity, act with respect and promote compromise has played a critical role in our success story. We are a free and open society. We understand the value of this institution as we have first-hand experience of what it can bestow on a country and its citizens at best.

Today we are again standing at a crossroads. And I have to admit that I am worried. Divisions between countries and blocks are widening. Our shared understanding of the world has dwindled – replaced by narratives that fuel controversy, conflict and hatred.

The number of on-going conflicts is the highest since the Cold War, and the number of states involved in them is on the rise. Especially in three hotspots: Palestine, Ukraine and Sudan. Human suffering has long since reached a point that should be unacceptable in this room.

The paradox, of course, is that many countries are rejecting multilateral cooperation at precisely the time when we need it more than ever. In my speech today, I will focus on three points and I will try to be as concrete and constructive as possible.

1. On what unites rather than divides us.
2. On how to end the current wars, especially those in Ukraine, Palestine and Sudan.
3. And on how to reform the UN to reflect the world we live in today.

By adopting the Pact for the Future, we proved that the UN works.

My address is to all of us collectively, not to anyone individually. I am not into blame games or whataboutism. We are all responsible. We are all a part of the problem as well as the solution.

First, let us focus on what unites, rather than divides us. When the Cold War ended, many of us, myself included, believed in "the end of history". Namely, that most of the world's roughly 200 nation states would revert towards peace, prosperity and harmonious co-existence.

There was a strong belief that freedom, democracy and globalisation would win the day. That technological development, free trade and open information would automatically lead to global development and stability for all.

But it did not. The problem was that we forgot that the dark sides of mankind – including power – needs to be contained in international institutions, like the United Nations. We assumed too much and did too little.

The things that were supposed to bring us together – like trade, interdependence and information – are now tearing us apart. We must turn the tide and focus on how we can find common solutions to common global problems.

The biggest challenges in the world – climate change, technology, sustainable development and conflict – are precisely the ones that we must work on together. We need the UN more than ever. We must get back to the trajectory where our common challenges drive cooperation instead of conflicts. We must look for win-win solutions for all, rather than zero-sum games benefiting the few.

To mitigate and adapt to climate change and to halt biodiversity loss, we need to work together. Our future depends on our response to these challenges in very concrete terms. We cannot respond to the very tangible concerns of small island developing states only by planning. We need results. If we do not solve the climate challenge, the crises that follow become unsolvable.

The same goes for technology. Some 30 years ago, we thought that digitalisation, artificial intelligence, robotisation and biotech would automatically deliver a better world for us. That technology would be a force for good only. We forgot that all disruptive technologies work in both directions – good and bad.

We are slipping away from the sustainable development goals. Global poverty is on the increase. When basic needs from nutrition to security are not met, it is impossible to focus on a vision for the future. We have made progress on many accounts, but we need to make sure that the fundamental rights – that we have all agreed together – apply to everyone, at all levels; regions, nations, peoples and individuals. We need to ensure that the rights of women and girls are respected. The rights of gender and sexual minorities need to be protected.

No matter which region we come from, our rhetoric and actions are often inconsistent – we say one thing and do another. Right now, we are at a stage where we must do what we say and work together. So let us focus on what unites us, rather than what separates us.

My second point is about conflict. When the UN was founded, the underlying idea was “never again”. Never again should anyone experience the horror that our predecessors went through in the first half of the 20th century. The founders of the United Nations promised to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. They – at least partly – succeeded.

But, are we, the new generation, succeeding? The simple answer is no. Only this year and last year, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed; more than ten thousand children in Gaza. Child abduction is being used as a weapon of war in Ukraine. Millions of people worldwide have been forced to leave their homes. Malnutrition and disease are on the increase.

Current wars highlight a glaring contradiction. Critical decisions about war and peace are made by a tiny number of people, often driven by a cynical need to hold on to power. The global majority, who have the interest in peace, do not have enough power in the international system to keep them in check. This is true in Ukraine and Palestine as well as in Sudan.

In Ukraine, a just peace, based on President Zelenskyy's ten-point peace plan, is clearly in the interests of the global majority. The war continues because Russian leaders are not willing to end it. While Russia is doing its best to blame others for its own aggression, we must systematically revert to the principles of international law and the UN Charter.

Neither Russia nor any other country has a historical right to anyone else's region or people. The core of the UN Charter is respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. Finland condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Finland equally condemns the attempts to manipulate the global information space to destroy the principles that have sustained world peace for decades. I call on President Putin to end this war and end it now.

In Palestine, we must ask ourselves, whose interests are driving the war? Peace meets the interests of the global majority. A ceasefire, a two-state solution and regional security arrangements would ensure stability as well as economic and societal development across the region.

International law holds the key to a solution that would keep both Palestinians and Israelis safe. After the most recent tragedies, there is no other direction but forward and we must find a solution. There are no more excuses.

In Sudan, regardless of which of the groups who are fighting will finally win the war, the victims of that war will be the civilians and the transition to civilian rule built by them. The civilian rule behind which the entire international community has promised to stand and the civilians for whom we promised to seek a better future.

In Sudan, we have failed to apply the principle of African solutions to African problems. Instead, Sudan is becoming an arena for regional and international rivalry. Our shared goal to build Sudan that would be an equal partner for all of us in security, trade and in the multilateral fora is moving further and further. No one benefits from this development in the long term.

I call upon the UN to take centre stage in conflict resolution and prevention once again. Peace-mediation cannot be transactional – it has to be centred in the United Nations. International law, the UN Charter, and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states must prevail.

My third and final point is that we need the UN more than ever, and without far reaching reforms I am afraid it will be sidelined. It all begins with agency, with a feeling that we all have a say.

Whether it is about climate change, technology, sustainable development or conflict, the same challenge remains: the current international institutions do not reflect global realities. The majority of the world is not properly represented in the global institutions and their interests are not met. This must change.

Ending wars would benefit most – if not all of us – but currently we do not have the mechanisms to drive the interest of the global majority. Many countries do not feel they have a say in global institutions. As a result, the institutions are losing their legitimacy.

Shortcomings in multilateral institutions encourage many to seek solutions outside traditional international institutions. Alliances, whether based on interests or values (or both), are creating a transactional world of disorder where size and power benefits a minority rather than the majority.

The cold truth is that we cannot postpone reform any longer. History is on our shoulders, just as it was with those who founded the United Nations in 1945. If our goal is to focus on what unites us rather than what divides us, we need a far-reaching reform of the UN Security Council.

Finland's three point proposal today is very concrete, some might say overly optimistic, but I do feel we have to begin somewhere. So here we go.

First, all major continents need to be represented in the UN Security Council, at all times. It is unacceptable that there is no permanent representation from Latin America and Africa in the Security Council, and that China alone represents Asia. We therefore propose that the number of permanent members be increased by five – more concretely two from Asia, two from Africa and one from Latin America.

The total number of permanent members would thus be 10. That combined with 10 elected members would ensure that the Security Council would hold roughly 10 percent of the UN's members at any given time. My part of the world, Europe, should think hard about how best to divide its existing two seats.

Second, no single state should have veto power. I fully understand that the veto was necessary in the aftermath of WWII, but in today's world, it has too often incapacitated the Security Council and halted decision making here in New York. The UN agencies are not subject to national vetoes and are working effectively precisely because no single member can prevent them from doing so.

Third, if a permanent or elected member of the Security Council violates the UN Charter, its voting rights should be suspended. This decision should ultimately be taken in the General Assembly. There should be no room for double standards in the United Nations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite all of our challenges, I want to end on an optimistic note. My optimism stems from an innate belief that when humans are faced with a binary choice, we often end up doing the right thing. Our choice today is simple. We can continue towards a multipolar world of disorder, or we can start getting serious about solving our common problems through multilateral institutions and a reformed UN.

As my mentor and great friend of the UN, the late President Martti Ahtisaari, said in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008: "Peace is a question of will. All conflicts can be settled, and there are no excuses for allowing them to become eternal."

Let us keep Martti's words in mind and start working towards peace.