

UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ADDRESS 2024

Monsieur Le President, heads of Government and State, ladies and gentlemen,

This is the sixth occasion on which I have addressed the United Nations General Assembly as Greece's Prime Minister. But it is the first in which I stand before you as the leader of a country which is an incoming member of the United Nations Security Council.

Greece is honored to accept that responsibility, for the third time, and I am personally grateful for the trust of the broader UN membership has placed in our candidacy for the 2025/26 term.

Three words of Greek origin, but of universal meaning, will guide Greece's upcoming tenure on the Security Council: Dialogue, Diplomacy, and Democracy.

Six core priorities underpin those guiding principles: the peaceful settlement of disputes; respect for International Law and the rules and principles of the UN Charter; women, peace and security; climate, peace and security; children in armed conflict; and of course, as a seafaring nation, maritime security.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Addressing you today 12 months on from last time round in September 2023, I don't think any of us can claim we are somehow better off now than we were back then. If anything, our world grows less secure by the day.

Whether it be escalating conflicts, geopolitical division, the climate crisis, mass migration, rising inequality, even the unchecked rise of Artificial Intelligence, these challenges jeopardize our present and our future. And yet within these challenges lie unique opportunities to transform the way we live, govern, and cooperate on a global scale.

We are at an inflection point. What happens next, depends to a high degree on international cooperation. It is here, in this Chamber, where we represent the collective voice of the international community, that we are called to act for the good of the entire humanity.

To do that effectively we must reinvigorate and strengthen the multilateral system. We have all agreed on the need to reform the UN, and especially the Security Council.

Since it first sat in 1946, the UN Security Council has not undergone any significant institutional reform. In that sense it is the relic of a world that no longer exists. Back then it was fit to address the challenges and opportunities of the post Second World War world but today it is not fit to solve the complex problems of the present.

On the Security Council reform, I believe we all agree it is essential to increase the meaningful participation of underrepresented regions. Nearly a third of the UN member states have never sat on the Security Council.

In addition, the enlargement of the Security Council must include both non-permanent and permanent members. New permanent members must include leading countries from all Continents. The composition of the Security Council should reflect the geopolitical and economic realities of the third decade of the 21st century, not the fifth decade of the 20th.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the Security Council, Greece will do its utmost to act as a stabilizing actor. That work begins in our immediate neighborhood. After all, as a gateway to Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, Greece sits less than 900 miles away from both Gaza and Ukraine.

A year ago, we did not know that on October 7 a horrific terrorist attack would leave 1.200 innocent civilians, men, women and children massacred, around 250 people would be taken as hostages or that in the war that ensued and over 42.000 people would perish, so far.

The ongoing violence in the Middle East is grave and civilians' horrendous suffering in Gaza is continuing. Escalation threatens to trigger a full-scale war in the region.

Greece calls on all parties – including Iran and those it has influence over – to back away from perpetuating the current destructive cycle of violence, to lower tensions and engage constructively in the pursuit of meaningful de-escalation.

A full-scale war in Southern Lebanon must be avoided at all cost. People on both sides of the border have a right to live peacefully without the threat of rockets or bombs shattering their lives. Greece fully supports the proposal for an immediate 21 day ceasefire.

In the wake of the October 7th attacks, Greece has always and will always support Israel's legitimate right to defend itself. But how it does so matters.

We must see the immediate return of all remaining hostages.

There must be an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. The humanitarian catastrophe there cannot go on. The killing must stop. Safe access to food, water, shelter, clothing and medicines throughout the territory must be ensured. International humanitarian law must be respected.

However remote, however impossible it may seem today, Israelis and Palestinians must be given the chance to live side by side in peace and security.

There is no other way than to make the two-state solution a reality. There is an absolute need to give Palestinians hope for the future. This is a sine qua non for peace, stability and security in the region, including the long-term security of Israel.

Building a fully functioning and sovereign Palestinian state will take concerted efforts by the sides involved, the actors in the wider region and the international community as a whole. But there is no other option to bring about lasting peace in this turbulent region.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A year ago, we were already in the second year of Russia's illegal war in Ukraine.

Since February 2022, Russia has brought violence, misery and destruction back to the European continent. Tens of thousands have been killed and millions have been displaced from their homes. The impact on civilian infrastructure and peoples' lives and livelihoods is colossal.

We stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people who are fighting for their freedom and independence, and for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their country. Respect for the territorial integrity of all states is the fundamental pillar of International Law and the cornerstone of the UN Charter.

In June, at the Summit on Peace in Ukraine, Greece stood shoulder to shoulder with many other UN member states, calling for a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, in full respect of Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

From the first hours of the Russian aggression the European Union and its member states rose to the occasion, providing every possible support to Ukrainians. And we are committed to continue to do so. Why? A simple answer: the war in Ukraine is not simply another “local” European conflict.

It is a brutal challenge to international stability and the international rules-based order that the UN stands for. As such it concerns the entire global community. Needless to also recall the very concrete impact this war has had on International Food security, affecting economies and basic needs of populations around the world, and especially in Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Greece has been placed by geography in a complicated neighborhood and I have spoken repeatedly from this stand on the difficult and at times tense relationship with our neighbor Türkiye.

Over the past year, I have met President Erdogan, 6 times, including our recent meeting on the sidelines of this Assembly a couple of days ago. Last December, we signed the Athens Declaration, a document stating our intention to resolve our differences according to the principles of international law and in the spirit of good neighborly relations.

We will continue to explore how to improve bilateral relations with Türkiye. There is potential for increased co-operation to tackle common challenges, such as climate change and migration. We continue to keep channels of communication open to diffuse any tension that may arise.

Greece is willing to work towards resolving the only major outstanding issue we have with our neighbor: the delimitation of the continental shelf and the Exclusive Economic Zone in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. We have not been able to effectively address this difference for more than 40 years. But this does not mean that it is destined to remain unresolved.

And I was glad to hear President Erdogan say that delimitation of maritime zones in accordance with international law is to the common interest of the entire region of the East Mediterranean.

I strongly believe that we have today a window of opportunity and we should be bold and wise enough to seize this chance. But if we are to try, we should both adopt a consistent approach in every aspect of our behavior towards each other.

On the other hand, when it comes to Cyprus, where this year we marked the 50th anniversary of Türkiye's illegal invasion and subsequent occupation of over a third of the territory of the Republic of Cyprus, we see no progress in Türkiye's position. This invasion was and remains a violation of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter.

As Prime Minister of Greece, I reaffirm here today our commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cyprus and to a solution, on the basis of a Bizonal, Bicomunal Federation. With a single sovereignty, a single citizenship and a single international personality, in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions.

A two-state solution cannot and will not be acceptable; it is not a solution. President Christodoulides gave yesterday from this podium an impassionate and sincere address, recalling the violence and trauma of the Cyprus invasion 50 years ago.

He also expressed his unwavering commitment to engaging in order to find a solution. I for one have absolute trust in this commitment. He is right to argue that International Law cannot be applied a la carte and that history cannot be rewritten or erased.

Greece fully supports the efforts of the Secretary General for the resumption of negotiations within this framework. We call upon Türkiye and the Turkish-Cypriot Community to come to the negotiating table, to establish mutual trust, and to engage in a frank discussion in pursuit of a mutually acceptable, just and viable settlement.

Can you imagine how powerful a message for the world community it would send, to all those seeking peace in seemingly intractable conflicts around the world, if we can find a permanent, viable and just solution to the Cyprus question?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me also mention the other side of our neighborhood and its future, the Western Balkans.

As the oldest European Union member in the region, Greece has always had a vision for the Western Balkans inside the European Union family. A vision that would reduce tension and conflict, and embed the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, driving development and prosperity for its people.

There has been progress, but that progress has not been enough. 21 years after the Thessaloniki agenda, significant challenges remain. Allow me to be very frank: the countries of the Western Balkans need to take the definitive decision to leave behind the traumatic legacy of the past.

And the political leadership of the Western Balkans needs to choose -by action- to embrace their European future. By improving democratic governance, consolidating the Rule of Law and freedom of expression, pursuing difficult internal reforms and- very importantly- committing to good-neighborly relations.

Reviving nationalist narratives and agendas should have no place today in a region on the cusp of joining the EU. Let's start with the basics: international agreements must be respected and implemented fully and in good faith, whether we are talking about Dayton, or Prespa or the Belgrade-Pristina Agreements.

There are disruptors who would like nothing more than to cause new divisions in this sensitive corner of Europe. It is time to relegate the famous phrase of Winston Churchill that “the Balkans produce more history than they can consume” once and for all to the history books.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude by addressing two issues critical to our shared future: the advent of Artificial Intelligence and, the adverse effects of digital technology, especially on our children.

The power of AI seems limitless. A technology with the potential to change our world in a way that will probably surpass the advent of the personal computer, the launch of the mobile phone or the birth of the World Wide Web.

Like steam or electricity before it, AI as a general technology presents huge opportunity to transform for good the way we live, collaborate and progress as humankind.

If used correctly, it could very well be driving solutions across science, climate change, R&D, medicine.

For our Governments, AI has enormous power to enhance productivity, facilitate more effective decision making, and deliver more efficient and higher impact public services. It is a game changer.

However, AI also has the potential to do extraordinary harm.

Unchecked, and in the hands of malign actors, AI could yet become a weapon of control in an uncertain world order. We are already seeing how generative AI is used to create more and more convincing deep fakes and content designed to spread misinformation and disinformation.

It is not lost on me, standing here, in this assembly, created to protect peace and security and promote global dialogue, that our world is being shaped by transnational actors in the form of a few technology companies, with more economic muscle than most of countries represented here.

This is leading to an imbalance that we must address. Those driving the technologies that are fundamentally re-shaping the societies are not accountable, and that needs to change. They, like us, in the end have a responsibility towards humanity.

Unlike with climate change, where we continue to convene globally to discuss national contributions within the context of a global problem, with AI there no such framework. The European Union is trying to rectify that, but, just as with climate, the EU cannot address this challenge alone.

And here I would like to praise the final report “Governing AI for Humanity” presented just a few days ago by the High-Level Advisory Body on AI established by the Secretary General. The recommendations of this Report can truly contribute to an agile and adaptable regime of global governance of AI that helps to showcase the benefits of AI and address its risks.

Bluntly, if both the Compact for the Future and a Global Digital Compact we agreed this week, are to have effect, then we may need to put the regulation and application of AI on a global footing. Eventually, what we may need is COP for AI with the participation not just of countries but also of the global technology companies.

This is an issue of the outmost urgency for one additional reason. We are already witnessing the adverse effects of digital technology and AI driven algorithms on the mental health of our children.

It took over a quarter of a century for campaigners to install seat belts in cars, despite the fact that all the evidence pointed to belts saving lives. We are in a similar situation today when it comes to children and teenagers and their use of digital and social media platforms.

Every day, children around the world are being exposed to content that exacerbates feelings of loneliness, and unrealistic standards of beauty. Frequently, our teenagers are pulled into extremist echo-chambers. Bullying, once contained to the real-world, now has its virtual twin. It follows children home from school and materialises on phones and tablets in bedrooms.

Social media algorithms are constantly improved by AI to keep children online for the maximum amount of time and away from the real world of unsupervised play. All for the purpose of making money.

Countless studies have shown that heavy use of social media is linked to depression, feelings of isolation, sleep deprivation and addiction. The brains of our children are being rewired and their development changed at an almost unimaginable scale. Yet we do nothing.

That is why I applaud initiatives such as the one announced by Australia for putting an age limit on social media use, with age verification technologies that cannot be circumvented.

Others should follow suit. Technology companies must come to the table and show that they will take tangible and measurable action to prioritise safety over profits. If they don't, pragmatic solutions like banning devices in our schools – which Greece has implemented as of this year - will be complemented by harsher regulatory responses.

Digital technology is no different than any other industry that needs to operate under health and safety regulations. The overarching principle, the golden standard, is one and the same: Do No Harm.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We live in a rapidly changing world. We cannot let our differences be an excuse for inaction. As Greece takes its seat on the Security Council, we do so mindful of the importance of our core principles: Dialogue, Diplomacy and Democracy.

This week's Summit of the Future demonstrates what is truly possible when we work together to renew multilateral cooperation through those principles.

In reiterating the commitment of all member states to the core values of the UN Charter we can still galvanize international resolve and forge innovative partnerships to address both the world's current and emerging challenges.

Greece stands ready to help the United Nations do its part in the year ahead.

Thank you.