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KEYNOTE SPEECH

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Cherishing multilateralism

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Your Excellencies,

It's a real honor to be your guest tonight, and a great pleasure to be among so many friends and former colleagues.

Many thanks, dear Neville, for having made this possible.

Let me start by saying that I have no doubt that outside the formal framework of meetings in the General Assembly Hall, the Security Council chamber, the EcoSoc and committees' rooms, informal meetings over breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, like ours tonight, are privileged moments to promote dialogue, build bridges and forge personal ties between representatives of different countries, contributing thus to the strengthening of the important "human" aspect of Multilateralism.

Many of you know — and that is my case as well since I used to be one of you —that when we deliver statements at the UN on a range of different issues, we often say, "this is a timely issue." I won't depart from that tradition tonight, only because the question of multilateralism has truly — not rhetorically — become timely, even more so today as we are in real rough waters.

Your Excellences, dear friends,

I won't dwell much on this aspect of the question as all you have to do in that respect is read a daily newspaper or turn on the television, let alone that virtually all the speakers who took the floor during the general debate of this seventy-ninth session of the General Assembly made this point, in more or less forceful terms.

Rather, I would like to stress that the question of multilateralism is also timely because multilateralism itself is in crisis and many of the characterisations that multilateralism receives today refer to such crisis. In fact, in addition to the "in crisis" qualifier, it is often also said that multilateralism is in trouble, in twilight, in decline, or to say the least, that it is ineffective. These negative accounts of the state of multilateralism are also often accompanied by no less negative terms to describe the state of the international society such as global disorder, institutional paralysis, and crisis of legitimacy.

And yes, it is perfectly normal to question multilateralism when confronted with the horrors of wars and human suffering that we continue to witness around the world. The very foundations of international cooperation are also questioned by new global challenges that are yet to be met with effective global responses.

In this respect, Secretary-General Guterres' opening remarks at the Summit of the future on 22 September are very telling: "Conflicts are raging and multiplying, from the Middle East to Ukraine

and Sudan, with no end in sight. Our collective security system is threatened by geopolitical divides, nuclear posturing and the development of new weapons and theatres of war. Resources that could bring opportunities and hope are invested in death and destruction. Huge inequalities are a brake on sustainable development. Many developing countries are drowning in debt and unable to support their people … In short, our multilateral tools and institutions are unable to respond effectively to today's political, economic, environmental and technological challenges".

In these moments, multilateralism can feel distant, theoretical, even powerless. However, the real issue here it is not about 'cherishing' multilateralism as an ideal; rather, if we continue to cherish multilateralism — and we do — it is because we recognize that we need it more than ever before as a relevant and indispensable tool of diplomacy, precisely because of the nature of the challenges we face.

Your Excellences, dear friends,

Multilateralism is not a system to praise only when things go well; it is the framework that offers structure, direction, and support when things start falling apart — or better to prevent them from falling apart. In the absence of such a system, crises tend to devolve into unmanageable struggles and conflicts, where the weak are left even more vulnerable, and fragile states and societies face the dangers of collapse.

Multilateralism provides the rules, the processes, and the platforms that allow states to come together — not as adversaries, but as equal participants. This is the cornerstone of international cooperation: it creates a space where dialogue and diplomacy can prevail over force and anarchy. In this sense, multilateralism is not just a diplomatic concept; it is a practical tool in a world marked by interdependence and the constant threat of conflict.

Though terms like 'multilateralism' and 'rules-based order' may seem abstract, they are in fact the critical pillars that maintain balance in a world where resources, wealth and power are unevenly distributed. This is especially true in an era where global challenges — such as climate change, pandemics, migration, terrorism, and threats emanating from cyberspace — transcend borders. We all know it, but it is always useful to stress that no single state, no matter how powerful, big, or rich, can adequately address these issues alone.

It is multilateralism, based on international law, that brings states together to find common solutions to common problems, ensuring that no state is left behind or overpowered by unilateral actions. Therefore, I would like tonight to focus, more particularly, on the relationship between multilateralism and international law.

The phrase *'force de la loi et non loi de la force'* — the force of law, not the law of force — captures this dynamic perfectly. Without the rule of law and the processes that multilateralism provides, international relations would revert to a Hobbesian state of nature, where might makes right, and where, particularly, small states, or fragile ones, would stand little chance of survival. And trust me, I know what I am talking about being a citizen of a small state which also happens to be in the midst of a region in great turmoil.

International law is the lingua franca of multilateralism; like any language, it has its nuances and variations yet it provides the framework for states to understand and engage with one another. Just as a shared language facilitates communication despite different accents or dialects, international law enables countries with diverse legal traditions and interests to cooperate, resolve disputes, and pursue common goals. While states may interpret certain principles differently, the underlying structure of international law allows for dialogue, negotiation, and mutual understanding, ensuring that multilateralism can function effectively.

The relationship between international law and multilateralism could be said to be symbiotic. International law gives legitimacy and binding authority to the outcome of multilateral efforts, while multilateralism provides the structures and processes through which international law is negotiated, created, and implemented. However, for this relationship to function effectively, states must be committed to both upholding international law and participating in good faith in multilateral fora and institutions.

The classic age of this symbiotic — or organic if you prefer — relationship between international law and multilateralism is undoubtedly that of normative multilateralism, which set out the fundamental rights and obligations governing the relationships between States, as with the (1961 and 1963) Vienna Conventions on diplomatic and consular relations or the (1969) law of treaties.

But multilateralism has also enabled States to participate on equal basis in identifying common interests and values in a great number of "substantive" — if I may say so — fields and consequently to agree on adopting treaties and conventions in order to protect and promote such interests and values and to define State's rights, obligations, and relationships is that respect.

Naturally, such democratisation of international law facilitated by multilateralism is not without its difficulties. Consensus, which is the fundamental basis of international law in a world of sovereign states, is often hard to find. However, the result sought and often achieved justifies the patience and efforts invested; the alternative being a fragmented and chaotic world.

So, at the center of this multilateral system is international law, which is the glue that is supposed to bind States to rules that transcend individual interests. Indeed, International law does not offer a perfect solution to all problems, but it remains the framework to which we turn either to prevent or to redress the damage that unilateral action can bring about.

Through its rulings, the International Court of Justice has succeeded to not only clarify and develop international law but to also help end violations of that law. Its work underscores the fact that even in the most politically charged situations, the rule of law can offer an alternative to violence and coercion.

Consider the growing number of cases submitted to the ICJ — this reflects a willingness by states to settle disputes within a legal framework rather than through force. More than 90% of the Court's judgments are complied with, a testament to the trust that States place in its impartiality and authority. The growing reliance on the ICJ is a reminder that the rule of law, while not always celebrated, is still upheld by those who seek justice.

From cases involving border disputes to questions of state responsibility, diplomatic relations, the prohibition of the use of force, climate change and international human rights, including racial discrimination and genocide, the ICJ has addressed complex and topical legal questions and served as a beacon for the peaceful resolution of dispute.

In this context, the role of the ICJ cannot be understated. It is through its jurisprudence that the principles of international law are given real-world meaning, and through its decisions that states are held accountable, reinforcing the foundations of a rules-based order, which is the bedrock of multilateralism.

There is only so much the Court can do. You are in charge of ensuring that the decisions made in the Peace Palace are carried out beyond.

Your Excellences, dear friends,

In moments of great uncertainty and peril, liked today, it is the rule of law and multilateralism that will steer us toward more justice and less instability.

Multilateralism truly matters the most when it is tested the hardest — when the fabric of international law is stretched, and when the rules we collectively accepted are challenged.

It is tempting, in these moments of crisis, to highlight the flaws in the multilateral system as a prelude to turn away from it. Yet, it is precisely during these times that abandoning multilateralism would be the most damaging.

The mere reality is that we have no choice. Moving away from multilateralism to give in to the temptation of unilateralism, or to confine ourselves in regional agreements, let alone succumbing to the illusion of achieving security and prosperity by turning in on ourselves is a luxury we cannot afford; this would simply be collective suicide.

Ultimately, I urge you to keep in mind that it is precisely in rough waters that we most need the compass of international law and multilateralism. Yes, our multilateral system has its limitations. And in my opinion, its main flaw is that it is not multilateral enough to successfully address the global challenges we face.

The information age and cyberspace have most definitely broken down many territorial borders and created new problems and unconventional threats and challenges to humanity, like those associated with artificial intelligence (AI) and synthetic biology, which can be addressed only through a renewed and strengthened multilateralism; that is a multilateralism not only based on greater state cooperation and common action, but also a more inclusive and networked multilateralism based on greater engagement with civil society, academia and the private sector. Most importantly, inclusiveness has to be intergenerational. “Giving young people a voice” should not remain a slogan. Youth must be seriously engaged and their voice truly listened to. Indeed, they represent the generation that will be most affected by the decisions we make today, as it is often stated in many reports produced by UN agencies.

Excellencies and friends,

Multilateralism is undoubtedly in crisis, facing increasing challenges from the intensity of geopolitical rivalries and conflicts, to the return of trade protectionism, the rise of populism, the spread of disinformation and misinformation, but above all multilateralism suffers today from its own institutional weaknesses.

I might be preaching to the converted when I say that strengthening multilateralism will require reforming the main global institutions to make them more representative, effective, and responsive to growing contemporary challenges. Indeed, they must adapt to the changing global order, but also restore trust in their ability to manage the global threats and challenges humanity is facing. On top of the list, we obviously have the UN Security Council, but such reform should also address the WTO crisis and both the IMF and World Bank lending terms and voting structure.

I have stressed enough that multilateralism and its main institutions are in crisis. But to repeat that and stop there is only to see the empty part of the glass. In fact, in the other part, the half full one, we first and foremost have our common awareness that the other part is empty. That is the cornerstone of any new way forward and it was well reflected in the “Pact for the future” that was adopted last month by the General Assembly along with its accompanying annexes, the Global Digital Compact and the Declaration on Future Generations. But there is more than this awareness in the Pact for it contains a groundbreaking commitment, in a new, clear and strong language, to the

reform of both the security council and the international financial architecture. Also, in the half full part of the glass are the 56 “actions” of the Pact. That these “actions” contain practical elements and concrete steps constitutes grounds for optimism indeed. However, “the proof remains in the pudding” as goes the saying. In other words, the glass will remain half empty until not only we move to implement the 56 “actions”, but we do so quickly.

Dear friends,

We are confronted with existential challenges and we cannot fail the generations to come. So let us rise together to these challenges to make the world a better place for them.

Thank you for having me with you tonight.

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