

United Nations Nations Unies

THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

LE PRESIDENT DE L'ASSEMBLEE GENERALE

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Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić, President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly, at the Opening of the General Debate of the Sixty-Seventh Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Distinguished Heads of State and Government,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor to stand before you as the President of the United Nations General Assembly for its 67th session.

My candidature was put forth by a proud, democratic country I have been greatly privileged to serve in two successive terms as foreign minister.

Like many other nations, mine has traveled through periods of tragedy and periods of glory.

At the close of the 20th century, a founding member of the United Nations descended into ferocious internal strife. The ensuing devastation and fratricide left deep wounds in their wake.

A painful era has now come to an end.

Today, our nation stands with confidence before the world again—less than two decades after having been left out of this chamber. We do so as a country steadfastly determined to advance the common interest of mankind, committed to responsible global citizenship, and dedicated to help shaping a world in which peace may triumph and international law prevail.

Excellencies,

The General Assembly has been defined as the chief deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the United Nations.

It is the most august body of sovereign states ever conceived by mankind a grand pantheon of hope for the peoples of the world.

Its founding compact, the UN Charter, was written so that every one of the Member States could observe the same rules and adhere to the same principles.

Established as a result of the historic victory over fascism, its purpose was clear: to set up for the first time in history a workable international system that aspires to justice, pledging not only equal rights to all nations, but ensuring their equal dignity as well.

“This is not merely a political organization,” said the President of the 2nd session of the General Assembly, Brazil’s Oswaldo Aranha. “It is not a simple covenant between nations,” he added, “but an undertaking in human thought and sentiment. From here,” he concluded, “emanates [...] a faith that the peoples of the earth may learn to know and trust each other in the full understanding of a common destiny.”

Excellencies,

The geopolitical landscape of our time is unlike any the world has ever seen, one of truly global interdependence. We are beset by a series of ruptures that seem to be building in intensity. Their effects can barely be kept in check.

The international system is at once becoming more volatile and more unpredictable. In my view, a number of distinct variables in the increasingly complex global equation require our heightened attention. Allow me to focus on three of the most important ones.

The first is across-the-board repositioning. A growing number of states are determined to enhance their external engagement, aspiring to play greater roles in their respective regions and beyond. As a result, power and influence in the international arena are becoming more diffuse.

Virtually no one’s position is the same today as it was just a generation ago, making it more difficult for a meaningful and enduring consensus to be reached on significant items on our shared agenda.

Secondly, in our era, capabilities once thought to be exclusively in the hands of states such as the ability to inflict harm on a massive scale could become more easily accessible to non-state actors. As the world becomes de facto smaller, countries have come to feel more exposed. We must find a way to act in concert, so the legitimate needs and concerns of Member States can be adequately met.

A third variable in the new global equation is the quest for empowerment. Whatever the specifics of their circumstances and grievances, populations across the world seek to have a greater say in how their destiny will be shaped.

This is today perhaps most manifest in the Middle East. The Arab Spring advanced democratic aspirations in a number of countries. The fate of some others still hangs in the balance.

There are concerns, however, that the Arab Spring may generate a number of unintended consequences. These include the reemergence of sectarian loyalties, and ethnic as well as tribal tensions many of them long-suppressed. The legacy of the grand, noble quest of the peoples of the Middle East for empowerment hinges on how these and other dangers will be dealt with.

Given the region's global political, economic and cultural significance, the unfolding events in that part of the world will have far-reaching implications for the entire planet.

Excellencies,

Rarely has it been more necessary for the world to draw closer together. It is to this endeavor that I believe we should devote the full scope of our resources.

This will require us to turn once more to the first principles of the Charter. In so doing, we will be able to give renewed meaning to the original intent of our founders.

Those who drafted the UN Charter understood that when nations feel secure, they are much more likely to unclench their fists and give the process of peacefully settling disputes a genuine chance to succeed.

In order to do so, it will be critically important to reinforce the universal adherence to accepted principles and rules, implemented without partiality or favor. Lack of clarity or selective enforcement, on the other hand, can quickly erode the basis for trust. This can easily lead to a situation in which nothing more than lip service is paid to the principles, and the rules lose virtually all meaning.

Excellencies,

Such a scenario is clearly not in the interest of this Organization. We must take decisive action to prevent it from ever coming to pass. I strongly believe that essential to such efforts is reinforcing respect for the equality, sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN Member States.

This is indispensable to achieving the first stated purpose of the United Nations to maintain international peace and security.

The Charter enjoins the parties to any dispute, to first of all seek a solution by, inter alia, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and judicial settlement.

It is with this in mind that I have proposed the following theme for this year's General Debate: bringing about adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations by peaceful means.

In taking up this critical issue, let us not forget that peace is not merely the absence of war. It also necessitates the reconciliation of those who are at odds. Only by so doing can we ever produce what a great New York philanthropist called, more than a century ago, "the enthronement of lasting peace a victory without tears."

Excellencies,

A solution to an international problem can be legitimately achieved only upon renunciation of unilateralism; it can become truly sustainable only when its provisions are willingly accepted and fulfilled in good faith.

When parties do commit to a settlement, I believe the General Assembly, coming together in consensus, can act as a moral guarantor of what has been agreed.

Excellencies,

I invite you to share your thoughts on the peaceful resolution of disputes a fundamental task of the United Nations. I look forward to hearing your concrete proposals on how the mechanisms that are in place can be better utilized, and to engage with you on incorporating new ideas into the overall efforts to revitalize the General Assembly.

Over the past several decades, our debates have been enriched by the views of civil society representatives. With notable exceptions, however, we have not yet found a way to draw upon the tremendous work done by the world's public policy institutes and think tanks. As President, I intend to launch a number of initiatives to harness their wisdom and experience.

I have also established a High-Level Informal Advisory Panel, composed of distinguished world statesmen, whose purpose will be to provide me with guidance and advice on the myriad issues that will be considered by the General Assembly.

In my view, one of the most important conflict prevention resources at our disposal is sustainable development. It is becoming increasingly interwoven into the global peace and security agenda. This is in part due to the attention we have all devoted to the Millennium Development Goals. As President, I will work with the Member States on bringing us closer to fulfilling this historic objective.

The General Assembly also needs to focus on the post-2015 agenda. What was agreed at the Rio+20 Conference will need to be implemented by this body. This includes preparations to launch a High Level Forum, which should be convened at the beginning of the next session. The General Assembly has also been mandated to establish a working group to propose a list of Sustainable Development Goals for consideration and adoption by the plenary. As President, I will encourage this process, which should involve strengthening a number of existing UN Funds and Programs, including the United Nations Environment Programme.

It is difficult to imagine the Rio+20 agenda becoming truly effective without the mobilization of additional resources. In accordance with the mandate given to the General Assembly in Rio, I will work to establish an intergovernmental process, under the framework of this body, to propose options on an effective financing strategy.

I believe that moving forward in the bold undertaking envisaged by the Rio+20 Conference not only complements, but will decisively reinforce, all other efforts to strengthen international peace and security.

Excellencies,

To be successful, I believe the General Assembly should further engage in the global development discourse. Greater emphasis ought to be placed on key economic issues—such as growth, job creation, and the production of new green goods and services in a more equitable trading environment. It is fortunate that the Charter tasks the United Nations with achieving cooperation in solving international economic problems.

Sovereign equality loses much of its meaning if it is understood solely as a political principle, downplaying the economic dimension.

Each in its own way, the G8, the G20, the IMF, the World Bank and others play critical roles. However, I strongly believe the General Assembly should participate more actively in advancing the global economic governance agenda.

During our sixty-third session, we endorsed the outcome document of the Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development. It proposed an “increase in cooperation, coordination, coherence and exchanges”—both in terms of policies and actions between the United Nations and international financial institutions, as well as relevant regional organizations.

The material destiny of our planet ought to be determined in a more inclusive fashion. No country can lift itself out of poverty if it has no right to have its voice heard. That is why, as President, I intend to convene an informal, high-level meeting over the course of the current session. Its aim would be the establishment, in the next few years, of a consultation framework for effective collaboration between the General Assembly and international financial and trade institutions, as well as groupings such as the G20.

Excellencies,

Another conflict prevention resource I believe is underutilized is the UN Alliance of Civilizations. Established as a soft-power tool of preventative diplomacy, it seeks to overcome differences and tensions within and amongst different cultures, faiths, and societies, all the while guarding against the erasing hand of uniformity that some fear could be a consequence of globalization.

We all sense the growing danger of what the ills and grievances of bygone centuries can inflict upon us, if they continue to be reawakened. Guided by the General Assembly, the Alliance could help the world expunge the venoms of its divisive past more effectively.

I believe that enlarging the common denominator of values and principles that bind us to each other truly serves the cause of peace. As President, I will work closely with the Alliance on ways to put our diverse identities more constructively in its service. This would help us ensure the future is no longer adversely affected by exclusionary historical narratives.

Excellencies,

As has been the case since its founding, the United Nations will only be as strong as the Member States choose to make it. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “an institution is the lengthened shadow of man.”

In this era of transformation, I believe that strengthening our collective faith in the approach only this Organization can legitimately provide, is the safest course for navigating away from the many rocks and shoals in the path of establishing a genuine global partnership for the 21st century.

One of the earliest advocates of peaceful settlement of disputes was Cicero, who famously expressed the longing *cedant arma togae* that arms might yield to law.

From the days of the ancients, to our own times, generations of valiant men and women have tirelessly endeavored to advance this noble cause.

The culmination of these great efforts is the United Nations Charter, our surest guide in this time of consequence.

Let us bring to bear on the problems we face a renewed spirit of cooperation, a tenacity of purpose, and a will to overcome differences.

Let us find the courage to master the many challenges ahead—and in so doing, work to assert the pre-eminence of justice.

Let us have faith in our ability to come together in the full understanding of our common destiny, so that this Assembly may go down in history as an Assembly of peace.

Thank you very much for your attention.