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In Defence of Openness

Address to the United Nations 68th General Assembly by

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Insularity and isolationism on the rise

Mr President, Deputy Secretary General, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen

In my lifetime, the world has been sliced up and labelled in many different ways:

East and West; Communism and Capitalism; North and South; Christian and Muslim; Developed and Developing, and so on.

But as we meet today, the most important fault line is not one of geography, or ideology, or religion, or wealth. It's the divide between those societies which are open, and those which are closed.

Open societies choose democracy and freedom at home, engagement and responsibility abroad.

Closed societies suppress the liberty of their citizens, draw a veil across their actions and withdraw from our shared international life.

We must be honest: the forces of insularity and isolationism have gained momentum in recent years.

Discrediting democracy feels easier. Authoritarian states point enthusiastically at the ongoing fallout of the 2008 financial crisis. Proof, they say, of a broken, Western model. They feel vindicated: their citizens may be less free, but their growth rates outstrip those in the West.

At the same time, in many of the states affected by the financial crash, austerity has given rise to a period of introspection: the impulse is to turn in rather than face out.

And so a crisis of confidence has threatened to take hold in parts of the developed world.

It is not surprising to hear some argue that liberal democracy has had its day and our multilateral system is becoming obsolete.

The resilience of open societies

But those who make these claims are wrong; they are drawing the wrong conclusions from recent events.

The real lesson of the last five years has been the remarkable resilience of open societies and the acute need for international cooperation in today's world.

Liberal democracies in Europe and across the Atlantic have weathered profound economic difficulty; the Eurozone did not fall over – as many said it would. By working together disaster was averted and the sovereign debt crisis is being managed.

In Europe we have maintained stability at a time of great upheaval because, for the most part, our citizens have expressed their frustration peacefully and through the ballot box. And where there *has* been unrest, mature democracies have managed it with relative success.

And so, just as the events of recent years have revealed the weaknesses of some Western economies, they have also underscored the great strength of open societies: the ability to evolve and adapt.

Open societies do not fear change – and, in the 21st Century, this openness to reform is critical to lasting stability and success.

Democracy; free speech; participation; equality before the law; the right to peaceful protest; the right to be educated; the chance to work – these are not Western values; they are the political and economic freedoms sought by citizens everywhere, and they are gaining force in every country around the globe.

Governments who ignore them are fighting a losing battle.

Democracy didn't fail in Egypt; a single set of elections failed. Egypt now needs to return to the path of inclusive democracy - the democratic urge remains as strong among the people as when they first rejoiced in Tahrir Square.

In other parts of the region, while the picture is mixed, important progress has been made. In Libya the General National Congress is working towards elections in early 2014; Morocco has a new constitution and, for the first time, a Prime Minister elected by parliament; Although difficult challenges remain, Yemen has chosen reconciliation, dialogue and democracy over violence. Tunisia is also focused on building a new democracy and economic growth, with progress towards a new constitution, and further elections expected in 2014.

Yes, these nations will undergo more turbulence – that is certain. Well-functioning democracy cannot emerge overnight, be exported from the West, or dropped on a country from 8000 feet – that much we have learnt from the failures of the past. Developing the culture and institutions needed – the rule of law, plural politics, human rights – this is a painstaking process for every country involved, and it requires strategic patience from the rest of the world.

But while the road to democracy is difficult, the direction of travel is set.

Everywhere you look people are standing together against discrimination, for equality; against oppression, for liberty.

A wave of openness has emerged – transcending borders and cultures. Men and women of every creed, faith and colour calling for fair opportunities and demanding to be heard.

The United Kingdom as a leading open society:

And the United Kingdom is clear: we are on the side of all those who support political freedom and economic empowerment.

There will be no pulling up of the drawbridge from us; no heading into retreat; we will resist any impulse to turn our back on the world.

Political stability

In North Africa and the Middle East, we are helping states put in place the building blocks for their democracies. Whether by training Libyan officials to supervise fair elections; or supporting a free media by training journalists in Morocco. These are the nuts and bolts of successful democratic transition.

We are also supporting these countries' economies through our stewardship of the G8 Deauville Partnership this year: leading efforts to boost trade and investment in the region, helping small and medium-sized enterprises; and, crucially, promoting greater participation by women. And we have kept the political spotlight on the need to return assets stolen by the former regimes in those countries.

In Syria, our priority is to help bring about a political settlement. The foundations for a settlement were agreed in Geneva last year – establishing, on the basis of mutual consent, a transitional governing body with full executive powers. We are in close touch with our partners about convening a second Geneva conference as soon as possible. No meaningful political solution can occur without the moderate Syrian opposition. We recognise the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. And we recognise their commitments to the Geneva process, and to building a secular, democratic and pluralist Syria that ensures equal rights for all.

On the issue of chemical weapons in Syria, the Assad regime committed a war crime under international humanitarian law on 21 August, launching a large scale chemical weapon attack on its own people – the first attack on this scale for 25 years - 88 years after such weapons were universally banned. As President Obama said on Tuesday, it is an insult to human reason to suggest that the regime was not responsible for this war crime. The international community must react, and react in unison. That is why we hope to adopt later today a Security Council resolution establishing binding legal obligations on the Syrian regime, for the removal and destruction of Syria's vast chemical weapons arsenal.

On Wednesday I announced that the UK will provide a further 160 million dollars of humanitarian support for the Syrian people, bringing total UK funding to 800 million dollars - half a billion pounds – our biggest ever response to a humanitarian crisis, much of which is aimed at helping the many children caught up in this tragic conflict. The world has raised close to one billion dollars of humanitarian support this month and I hope that others will step up and contribute. Most importantly, I call on all parties inside Syria to allow humanitarian agencies to operate without hindrance or the threat of violence. Unless this urgent humanitarian access is given, no amount of money can alleviate the scale of the Syrian people's suffering.

I welcome President Rouhani's comments on Tuesday that he wanted constructive engagement between Iran and the rest of the world, and to engage immediately in time-bound talks on the nuclear issue: encouraging words which I very much hope are matched with genuine action. I am pleased that negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme will restart in October. If Iran's words are followed by concrete steps, then there is a real opportunity to make progress in resolving the serious international concerns about Iran's nuclear programme. We also look to a more constructive approach from Iran in helping resolve the crisis in Syria, and we have made clear to Iran that we are ready to improve our relationship on a step-by-step and reciprocal basis.

Of course, one thing that would fundamentally transform the Middle East is a conclusive two-state agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An agreement based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps that leads to a sovereign and viable Palestinian state living in peace alongside a safe and secure Israel. A universally recognised Palestine alongside a universally recognised Israel.

I commend the dedicated efforts of Secretary Kerry and the courageous leadership of Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas, which have enabled direct peace talks to resume. I sincerely hope both parties will make every effort to keep talks going – including a halt in new settlement building. The international community must fully support the parties as they make the difficult decisions necessary to achieve a lasting peace. Britain stands ready to play its part.

As we wind up our military operations in Afghanistan, the UK continues to work with the Afghan government to ensure a successful transition. The Afghan National Security Forces are now leading on security and continue to grow in confidence and capability. This is a significant achievement.

In the UK, we recognise the serious challenges still ahead for Afghanistan. But we strongly believe that there is room for optimism about the country's long-term future. This is a crucial time for Afghan men, women and children, as they prepare for elections in 2014, which must be credible, transparent and inclusive.

Economic Development

Poverty is, of course, as great a threat to stability and freedom as conflict and oppression. And so, despite the strain on our finances, the UK has met our target to spend 0.7% of Gross National Income on development assistance. We are the only country in the G20 to do so. Following the global economic crisis we said we would not balance our books on the backs of the world's poorest. We have held true to our word.

On Monday we announced that we will provide 1.6 billion dollars to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. That's 10% of the Fund's replenishment - so long as others join.

And women and girls remain at the heart of our development agenda. They are the key to economic growth, so investing in girls' education is the single most effective thing we can do to break the cycle of poverty. We must end gender inequality, which is the root of violence against women.

This ambition is at the heart of the UK's initiative to end sexual violence in conflict, and I would encourage all states, yet to do so, to endorse the declaration to Prevent Sexual Violence in Conflict. Over 115 states are already committed: we're sending a message to the victims of these devastating crimes that they are not alone and that their attackers will be punished.

We've also used our presidency of the G8 to focus on three areas where we can support global prosperity: boosting trade; ensuring better transparency – to help developing nations benefit from resources that are rightfully theirs; and cracking down on tax evasion and closing tax loop holes.

This was just the start of our work on this agenda and we are pleased that the UK's trade, tax and transparency priorities have been fully reflected in agreements reached by the G20 - including extending the commitment to resist protectionist measures by a further two years to the end of 2016, so that trade remains as free and open as possible.

Reviving Multilateralism

Whether it is in the G8, the G20, the EU, or NATO, the Commonwealth, or as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the UK will continue to be an active and engaged player in the world.

The biggest problems we face are problems we share.

Take climate change: This morning's report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirms that sea levels are already rising, and ice is melting faster than we expected. The report is an authoritative rebuke to all those who still persist in claiming that man-made climate change does not exist. The UK will continue to cut emissions, as well as giving over 6 billion dollars to assist developing countries to do the same and adapt to environmental changes. But if we are to halt the devastating effects of climate change, we must listen to the science, act now and act together. So we welcome the Secretary General's announcement of a leaders' summit next year, as a key step towards all nations agreeing a deal in 2015 to take action to avert this crisis.

And of course we are all affected by the scourge of terrorism. Whether it is a soldier brutally murdered on a quiet London street or innocent shoppers gunned down in a busy Nairobi mall – we are all vulnerable.

Following the recent horrific events in Nairobi, the UK is working closely with the governments in Kenya, Somalia and countries across the region to tackle this issue.

Our global response to terrorism must be robust, intelligent and cover all those areas where our work together can make a genuine difference.

Alone we can take small steps forward, but together we can take giant leaps.

That much was clear earlier this year when we signed the world's first Arms Trade Treaty to better regulate the global sale of weapons. The United Kingdom is proud of the role we played in delivering it and we urge any countries who have not signed to do so.

This treaty reminds us that, with enough political will, we can come together and do the previously unthinkable. And that should embolden us to do more.

The UN has many virtues – but it also has serious shortcomings, and they must be faced.

The UN has no greater friend than the UK, but it does not adequately reflect the world we live in today. The Security Council must be reformed. Unless more room is made at the top table, it will become an anachronism – a relic of a different time. That is why the UK continues to support permanent seats for Brazil, India, Germany and Japan, and permanent African representation too.

And we call on all states to play their part here, and in our other international institutions, just as we will play ours. We are at our best when we engage constructively with one another and when we are ambitious pursuing our shared goals.

That is as important for those countries whose economies and influence have grown and transformed over more recent years, as it is for the old, established powers. Greater influence means greater responsibility. The world is a better place because Brazil is taking a lead in tackling deforestation; because Mexico has enshrined climate change targets into law; because the Republic of Korea is leading the way on nuclear security. But there is much more to do. Many more areas to take a lead.

A global trade deal to cut bureaucracy at borders – the subject of a WTO meeting taking place in Bali in early December – would mean a trillion dollar boost for the global economy.

In the next two years, the UK wants to do as much as it can to drive progress on the UN's Millennium Development Goals, and we're also working in the UN and with civil society to set out a post-2015 agenda that is even more ambitious. There can be no greater goal than to eradicate extreme poverty, leaving no one behind.

On these and all other issues facing our nations we are stronger together than apart. Now, more than ever, we must fend off the forces of insularity and isolationism, stand up for our values and look out to the world.

Mr President, that is what the UK will do. We stand ready to work with all others who will do the same.