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Norway's aspirations for the UN

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured and grateful for the opportunity to address this highly respected institution.

China's position paper ahead of the 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly shows that Norway and China have a lot in common. It says:

“The UN is an important platform to practice multilateralism, achieve win-win cooperation and build a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity. China firmly supports the UN in continuing to play a central role in international affairs and firmly supports efforts to uphold and strengthen the effectiveness and authority of the UN.”

I could not agree more.

We are fully aware of China's strong and rapidly growing role inside and outside the UN and that there can be no international solutions without China. China is an important player, a leading voice in the group of developing countries, a major troop contributor to peacekeeping operations. You have shown commitment to the UN Charter and the noble cause of multilateral cooperation.

And of course, as a permanent member of the Security Council, China has a heavy responsibility on its shoulders, not only to take necessary action to secure international peace and stability on behalf of all member states, but for the credibility and authority of the Security Council, and for the very future of multilateralism.

For centuries, foreign policy meant defending and promoting national interests. For decades, it also meant forging a multilateral system to regulate relations between nation states in accordance with international law.

Ever since 1945, the UN has been vital to Norway's foreign policy. We favour a stronger UN.

But the world is changing. The UN has to evolve and adapt to a new set of actors, new methods of communication and new ways of interacting in the international community.

The UN must respond to the challenges of poverty, of financial crisis, food crisis, energy crisis, climate change, threats to biological diversity, and the new security challenges arising from failing states, increasing migration, arms proliferation and the spread of communicable diseases such as HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and malaria.

More than ever do we need the UN and related forums where everyone takes part, universal forums where communication is kept open.

But the UN cannot confront the challenges alone. It needs to interact with a complex variety of actors in a complex global setting, including regional organisations, financial institutions, the business community, and, of course, the government and civil society of each country concerned.

We need to apply the lessons learned from the democratic approach we take to safeguarding our societies at home to the way we structure our response in the global arena. National public goods enable our societies to thrive. Likewise, the international community needs global public goods.

If we succeed in directing the attention of governments and their diplomats to how national interests can only be secured if we achieve the common good, we will be able to establish a system of interdependence based on confidence, dialogue and understanding.

Most importantly: Nations must not take the law into their own hands.

The UN is a unique, historic institution:

- A) as the world's central norm-setter, an arena for drawing up rules that many are bound by;
- B) as a meeting place and arena for solving our most pressing global problems;
- C) as a legitimising influence for joint action in the best interests of mankind, and;
- D) as an operative and coordinating actor, working to building peace, development, human rights, providing emergency relief, protecting the environment, providing security.

In which areas has the UN demonstrated drive, relevance and strength?

Firstly. Take the UN as norm-setter. As the basis for a large number of conventions. How would Member States today resolve disputes without the Law of the Sea? How could we start to address climate change without the Climate Change Convention and Kyoto Protocol negotiated through the United Nations? Where would we be in securing fair, open and predictable international trade without the WTO?

It is now 60 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. The UN is the key player in monitoring and developing human rights norms. We see both setbacks and progress, and the UN is and remains key.

Secondly, the UN as arena and meeting place. This arena role is becoming increasingly important the more complex the world becomes. Many important actors seek arenas outside the UN, arenas where memberships is not universal, and where the great powers may think they can rule undeterred.

In our view, the supremacy of the great powers is an illusion. Reality is that there can be no permanent solution to common challenges unless the UN's norms and arena functions are used to bring states and actors together.

Thirdly, the UN as a legitimising body. The Security Council, with all its internal tensions and need for reform, is still a unique "world court of opinion". It can legitimize the collective use of force in extreme cases. It has a strong normative force. It is a stabilizing force in today's world.

But the greatest danger to the future role of the Security Council is the Council itself. The veto is a powerful and dangerous weapon, but it strikes both ways. When the Security Council fails to act against genocide and mass atrocities, fails to act decisively when world opinion expects and demands action, it undermines its own authority.

One thing is clear: The international institutions we have today are growing old. Indeed, many are well over 60, they were established at the end of the 1940s, some are even older, and have not been through effective reforms that enable them to meet the challenges of globalisation well enough, quickly enough, challenges such as climate change, poverty, the food crisis and energy conflicts. This applies to UN organisations and institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

Norway is a firm supporter of comprehensive Security Council reform. We are open to the idea of enlargement in both the permanent and non-permanent category to strengthen the credibility and legitimacy of the whole organisation. The right of veto, however, should not be extended to new members. It is also important to guarantee that smaller states have the opportunity to serve as members of the Security Council. We also support the reform of Security Council working methods and procedures.

What are the UN's strengths and weaknesses?

Both the strengths and the weaknesses relate to the fact that all progress requires close agreement. There is still a tendency for Member States to promote their own interests too narrowly defined, without being willing to commit themselves to global norms, compromise on the issues closest to their heart or contribute to the world community, unless they stand to gain directly themselves.

When everyone has to agree, the situation easily arises where those who are least willing have the most influence. That, unfortunately, is a threat to multilateralism in the long run.

The UN is good at operating the political arenas and keeping the discussions going. But it is up to the Member States to reach agreement on international rules.

The UN is good at providing humanitarian assistance, quite good at promoting human rights, and getting better at providing development support and advice.

The UN is good at peace operations, quite good at peace negotiations when the conditions are right, but not so good at peacebuilding.

The UN has problems with disarmament and non-proliferation.

The UN is too fragmented, and lacks in coherence.

And not least, the UN has too many tasks in relation to its resources.

The UN has too many old mandates.

The UN writes too many reports.

And the UN does not always use its resources where they should be used.

The most important thing for the UN now is to become better at delivering common global goods – goods that can only be the responsibility of the world community, goods that everyone, especially the weakest, can benefit from.

What about the fourth aspect of the UN, as an operative and coordinating actor in the field?

For many of the world's poor and destitute, the UN is associated with concrete efforts in each and every developing country. Food, water, health, education, peacebuilding, state building. The UN plays a key role in development and the fight against poverty.

But we also know that the UN's development efforts are fragmented and to some extent not effective enough. They are also under-financed.

Norway is currently the sixth largest contributor to the UN's operational activities for development, humanitarian relief and environment.

It is a fact that we are proud of, but we are more worried than proud.

Actually, it is a chilling reality that without funding from a handful of states, the UK, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, UN funds and programmes for development would not only suffer. They would crumble. They would fall apart.

It is a telling piece of trivia, that if the mainly tied, in-kind US support to the World Food Programme is taken out of the equation, Norway and Sweden are bigger donors to the UN than the United States.

Is it healthy that UN finances are being saved by a few small countries on the outskirts of Europe? In my opinion, the biased burden sharing in funding UN agencies cannot continue.

I think the major powers should contribute more voluntary funding for the UN. Especially the G-8, who can certainly afford it.

I also think that many countries, including the G77, should think at least twice, and take into account how much they benefit from the UN, before they put so much energy into negotiations about keeping their compulsory UN contributions at the lowest possible level.

Norway is a strong proponent of UN reform and reorientation of UN development activities at country level. It is not because we are trying to save money. Actually, the opposite is true and we would like to see the UN make such good use of our money that we could contribute more.

We want UN reform because we feel that our money could be used much better and provide increased benefits to people and the governments that the UN supports.

Twenty different UN organisations are represented in Egypt and in Bangladesh. In Ghana there are 14. More than 20 UN organisations work on issues related to water. More than 10 work on schooling and education for girls.

Our UN ambassador in Geneva is involved in nearly 40 different governing bodies. The UN has grown. It has an enormous number of bodies. It is in danger of becoming a collection of talk shops, too fragmented and too loosely governed.

Too many resources are used to run the system. Not enough reaches the people in need on the ground. This trend must be reversed.

This is why there is a call for closer coordination and greater consistency.

The UN must take a far more coordinated and united approach to development in each country. Efforts should be coordinated under a single leader, with a single programme, and a common budget. The aim would be to achieve collaborative and joint UN activities and programmes to take better advantage of the diverse strengths within the UN system to support developing countries in addressing the complex challenges facing them.

UN reform must include UN headquarters. The situation today is that support for development programmes for each country are dealt with in a number of different committees, and by an array of individual UN agency headquarters with administrative rules and systems that effectively prevents them from working together. We can hope that the signals given and the decisions taken in the various governance bodies will generally be in alignment, but this is not always the case in practice.

The UN's way of organizing its efforts in relation to women and gender equality is a case in point. These efforts need to be stepped up. But currently the UN's resources are divided into a number of smaller secretariat units, each without the ability to have very much impact. We need an amalgamation of these into a stronger unit that can reflect the strong emphasis Member States have on promoting gender equality and improving the participation and role of women in society.

Environmental considerations need to be better incorporated into efforts throughout the UN system. Moreover, the follow-up of the large number of multilateral agreements – 600 are registered in the UN – would benefit from closer coordination.

And finally, we must continue the reforms for more systematic and joint emergency relief and disaster prevention.

The world needs the UN. Not because we dare to hope for a world that follows the Charter to the letter. But because the UN and the whole “united nations” concept is our best guarantee of security, and our best hope for a better future.

Norway has for many years been involved in development cooperation with countries in Africa. The continent is lagging behind when it comes to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Its security problems is taking up much of the Security Council's agenda. And we have every reason to believe that the current financial crisis will have a negative impact on foreign direct investments in Africa.

We are also aware that China has a long-standing political relationship with Africa, and that China has identified the African continent as an area of significant economic and strategic interest. The Chinese development model is attractive to many African leaders, and Chinese investments represents an important development opportunity. It would be interesting to have

a dialogue with China on how we can encourage not only economic development, but also democratic processes, economic freedom, and respect for human rights across the African continent.

Norway and China have in common a desire and commitment to uphold and strengthen the values, the effectiveness and the authority of the UN. We should work more closely together.

Thank you for your attention.