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Speech to the Asia Society Australia
(via Zoom)

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One of the last functions I attended before I left Australia was the launch of the Asia Society Centre at the National Gallery in Melbourne. And one of my first calls in New York was on Asia Society President, Kevin Rudd. So it's good to square the circle by talking to the Asia Society in Australia from New York.

Can I firstly acknowledge the important work the Society undertakes in building bridges of understanding between Asia, Australia and the United States across business, policy, education and the arts. At a time where great power competition is affecting more and more areas of our lives and where there is worrying talk of decoupling and choices, your mission is more important than ever.

I have now been in the saddle as Australia's Permanent Representative to the UN for almost nine months. And about half of that time has been in COVID lock down. The images and statistics you have all seen from New York have been stark. A field hospital in Central Park. The cavernous Javits Convention Centre converted into a giant Intensive Care Unit. The thousand bed US Navy Hospital Ship "Comfort" anchored off Manhattan. In New York State, with a population comparable to Australia we've

seen almost 25,000 deaths and 400,000 confirmed infections. You have all seen and felt the pain of New York.

But New York hasn't just been a conspicuous victim of COVID-19. As the home of the United Nations, it has also been mission control for the global humanitarian response. Seldom before have the UN policy makers and ambassadors charged with framing an international response been as personally affected and in such close proximity to the crisis itself. And this was really brought home by the sight of New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio receiving a quarter of a million facemasks from the UN's humanitarian stockpile.

For the Australian Mission to the UN, our immediate focus was supporting the work of our New York Consulate-General in assisting Australians, working closely with our UN Pacific Island colleagues on their needs and playing our part in the broader global response effort.

Now this is a time of travel bans and closed borders, where nations quite rightly look to their obligations to their citizens. But the need for the United Nations to fulfil its mandate to support those countries and people facing the greatest challenges has never been more important. The good work being undertaking by nations within their borders to contain the virus could easily be undone if the UN's role in supporting mitigation and recovery efforts in countries of need is not fulfilled. If COVID has taught us anything, it is that no one is safe until we are all safe.

Against this backdrop, it's understandable the UN has received close attention. It's the premier intergovernmental organisation – a forum for all States, big and small, to come together to address shared challenges and to pool their resources towards agreed goals.

The efficacy of UN efforts deploying global taxpayer dollars during an international crisis is core business for governments and their diplomats. It's the role of Australia's diplomatic

representatives to international organisations to set their priorities and scrutinise their operations. To question, even during a crisis, is not a demonstration of a lack of support. To the contrary, it shows just how highly countries such as Australia value the work of bodies like the World Health Organisation (WHO). And how crucial it is that they are as effective as they can be.

The WHO, however, is far from the only UN agency involved in the COVID response. As borders closed and travel bans were put in place, the World Food Programme filled the gap left by airlines, transporting life-saving medical equipment and humanitarian supplies across the globe. Since the outbreak, WFP has operated flights to more than 130 countries, transporting huge volumes of PPE, masks and ventilators, as well as more than 2,500 responders from over 80 aid organisations. Only an international organisation, with aid and logistics hubs in nine countries, could play this often overlooked, but critical role.

At the same time, the UN is seeking to maintain its existing development work and peacekeeping operations under challenging circumstances. It's easy to forget, the UN feeds 87 million people in 83 countries every day, it vaccinates half the world's children, supports democracy by assisting 60 countries a year with their elections, and keeps the peace with 95,000 peacekeepers in 13 missions.

The UN's development work has also pivoted to address COVID. The fundamental support it provides to government health and education systems and to peacebuilding can't be put on hold, because COVID exacerbates vulnerabilities. A decrease in existing UN vaccination programs, for example, would help create an environment for reservoirs from which the coronavirus and other diseases could spread.

Assessing the performance of the UN system in the current crisis will be important, so too will be determining how and where it may need to change in the light of experience. The Government's

audit of how Australia can best engage in international organisations has proven to be very timely.

The UN is far from perfect. There's scope to improve performance. But it remains an indispensable partner in the COVID response and recovery and beyond through its development, humanitarian and peace and security work.

As the UN marks its 75th anniversary we should acknowledge the organisation's achievements, but we should also make a clear-eyed assessment as to how it can and must evolve and improve. But to do this it's important to first understand the UN and the limits of what can be achieved.

And the best analogy I've heard to describe the United Nations and its organs is to liken it to something of a cross between a parliament and the Vatican.

The General Assembly, consisting of 193 Member States and with six main subsidiary committees, operates with the collegiality and structure of a parliament with oversight committees. Fifty percent plus one is required to do things and to stop things. Ambassadors operate more like Senators in a chamber where no party has the numbers rather than as bilateral ambassadors seeking the favour of a host government.

Alongside the General Assembly in the international enclave on the East River at Turtle Bay is the UN Secretariat. Not entirely unlike the Vatican City state, with the Secretary General cast in the role of a secular Pope appointed by the conclave of Ambassadorial Cardinals in the Security Council.

And many of the UN agencies operate a bit like quasi-independent Papal States, with their own mandates and governance structures.

The UN system is a labyrinth. It's complex. It can be immensely frustrating. But in most fora, it's numbers that count. A failure to

carry the day is ultimately a failure to convince more than half the member states of a proposition. In the Security Council you have the added task to ensure assent from the Permanent Five Members – the victors of World War Two and nuclear weapons states all.

Having served as both Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and as Manager of Government Business in the Senate, this UN environment feels like home.

I get the iron laws of arithmetic.

But one thing I've noticed since I've been in this role is that a false dichotomy is often drawn between bilateral and multilateral work. As though in diplomacy, you do one or the other. You're either a muscular and realistic bilateralist or a starry-eyed multilaterist. Neither bilateralism nor multilateralism are ends in themselves. Each are merely tools of sovereign states to advance their interests.

Bilateral work is like legislating in the House of Representatives. Wins are high profile, usually quick and often straightforward.

Multilateral work is like legislating in the Senate. Wins are fewer, they take longer and don't always garner attention. They're hard won, through persuasion and coalition building. They entail compromise.

And just as in legislating you need both House and Senate, in prosecuting the national interest you need both bilateral and multilateral engagement.

This is obvious. But I find the obvious is often overlooked.

I think that's why so many sling off at the UN and multilateralism. Just as they do at the Senate, for that matter. But such howling is pointless. The fundamental problem is not the institution itself. Where there's an outcome you don't like, it's usually a function of the decisions or behaviour of individual member states.

But none of this is to say the UN system and its institutions don't need continual tending, refurbishment and some reform. They do. But these should be practical and realistic.

UN technical agencies are a case in point. They do good work and usually receive little public attention. But they do have their moments. The WHO is currently in focus. And member states have agreed on a process for review. This is as it should be. And in this effort, Australia has led.

The UN Development system has seen some concerted and real reform, introducing contestability between UN agencies and better coordination at country level.

The UN Secretary-General, for instance, has recognised the real needs of the Indo-Pacific region and recommended establishing a new UN office in the North Pacific. This is in addition to UN offices in Apia and Suva, which are currently stretched thin coordinating UN delivery across 14 countries and territories. A third office would enhance UN services and results, and help address the very specific geographic challenges facing the North Pacific.

And in the peace and security field, reform has meant putting a premium on conflict prevention and breaking down the silos within the UN's human rights and development work. Because in the real world, beyond UN Plaza, these pillars are connected. But these reforms are not uniformly supported. They are contested. And their implementation is tested. Some countries just don't want UN peacekeeping missions to have gender advisers or strong mandates to protect civilians. We argue over these things. And through painstaking diplomacy, with support from likeminded countries, we inch forward.

The perennial discussion is, of course, Security Council reform. It's been with us since the veto was established. A veto which

Australia led opposition to at the UN's inception. So much so that at the time, one of our allies described our then Foreign Minister as frightful.

And it's usually mass atrocities that spark discussion of veto and Security Council reform. As it should be. Perhaps the clearest example, is the failure of the UN Security Council to meaningfully alter the horrific trajectory of the Syrian civil war. Russia has exercised its veto 15 times to block meaningful action on Syria. Disturbingly, China has recently joined it.

Security Council reform is no easy feat. But there is some thinking around this.

While the recent spotlight on the UN and its agencies has highlighted the important role of multilateral bodies when confronted by a global pandemic, it's also shed light on the stakes at play for Australia.

It's brought into relief, the benefits to Australia's interests through the international rules and norms set by these institutions, and the consequences of stepping away and leaving others to shape the international system in ways that may contradict our interests.

The UN's universality and political neutrality make it a crucial partner in seeking to embed support for human rights, good governance and the rule of law in our region. Including where our bilateral equities may make it harder for us to lead.

Australia's interests are profoundly global and interwoven. Perhaps more than most as a mid-size power with an outward oriented economy, we depend on the stability and the prosperity of our neighbourhood and the world for our own stability and prosperity. The recent audit of Australia's engagement in multilateral institutions concluded that the rules and norms developed through the UN and the services it delivers are vital to Australia's interests, values, security and prosperity.

The UN and multilateral bodies regulate international cooperation in key sectors of our economy including civil aviation, maritime transport, intellectual property, telecommunications and agriculture. They promote universal values, such as human rights, gender equality and the rule of law, which we hold dear. They play critical roles in responding to global emerging challenges, from the regulation of cyber security and maintaining a peaceful outer space, to disease outbreaks.

Much of the international law the UN created and champions plays a major, but unobtrusive role in our day-to-day lives. When we order goods internationally, fly abroad or observe that the hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica is almost closed, it's easy to forget that the rules that make all that possible were developed by the UN. And in the Indo-Pacific region, UN norms on the freedom of navigation and dispute settlement are essential to regional stability and prosperity.

So after nine months as Ambassador, I maintain my faith in the worth of the UN. While COVID has overshadowed everything, it has reinforced both my and the Government's thinking about the UN.

My message is, the UN system still works. We still need it. We need to invest in it. We don't have an alternative to it.

But you've also got to know how to use the UN to advance Australia's interests. And understand how others may be seeking to use it to advance their own.

And at the same time, work consistently, and patiently, on reforming it in ways that are both practical and realistic.

Happy 75th Birthday UN.

Thanks very much.