

Lecture Vrije Universiteit Brussels Model United Nations (VRBMUN)

Diplomacy Days

29th April

Students and Participants, good morning to you all.

I am pleased to address you at this ‘Diplomacy Days’ event, which I understand comes as a substitute to the University’s regular and very successful, Model United Nations Conference.

I congratulate you for taking this initiative to go online and thank you for inviting me to participate.

Well done also for the qualities and skills that your organisation seeks to instil in its members. From what I read about your activities, you have all the credentials to act as a centre of excellence for motivated and dynamic youths.

I have been asked to share my views on the ‘State of the World.’ Now that is a vast subject indeed. There is obviously so much to say about this broad issue. However, I have chosen to steer away, somewhat, from the timid statements usually expected on more formal occasions.

I intend to be bold and straight forward.

Making the best use of a young, free-thinking, and unconditioned audience such as you, I am taking the liberty of provoking your thinking on several international issues, which I hope we can follow up in our future discussions.

Let me start with vaccine equity. I will start off with an immediate challenge facing the world, which concerns the supply and distribution of COVID vaccines.

That the world is an unfair place, and that the international community is an ill-balanced playing field is a well-known fact. Inequalities and social injustice are no novelty. Yet, the pandemic further amplified this divide, and we are risking taking a very dangerous turn when it comes to equal access to the COVID-19 vaccines.

As the WHO warned in January this year, we could be on ‘the brink of a catastrophic moral failure’ - the price of which could be thousands, if not millions, of lost lives in the worlds’ poorest countries.

Together, we need to analyse the source of inequalities at the heart of several global health challenges, and together coordinate our efforts for eventual global recovery.

Despite international arrangements and Declarations and hundreds of millions of vaccines distributed across the globe, there still remain crucial obstacles that have to be overcome.

In some low and middle-income countries, vaccination programmes are still rudimentary or have not even been launched. This has caused hospitals and clinics to be inundated with patients way beyond their capacity, becoming possible infection hubs themselves, with health workers working around the clock, and infrastructures stretched to unprecedented limits.

Lack of supply, inequitable distribution, export restrictions, supply chain barriers, obstacles related to logistics and customs are still posing a threat to an effective, comprehensive drive to combat the virus worldwide.

The emerging phenomenon of ‘vaccine nationalisation’ is the new international challenge we need to contend with. It has regrettably shed light on how, in spite of appeals for global solidarity, we are failing to put what we preach into practice.

This has led to questions on whether the international system of decision-making is effectively working, or whether it is still the interests of the strong, the mighty and the rich that ultimately prevail.

We need to take a back seat and reflect on what this pandemic has taught us.

My second reflection is on multilateralism. Let me start by declaring that I am a firm and staunch supporter of multilateral diplomacy. Smaller countries like my own, are all too familiar with the benefits one obtains when acting in multilateral systems.

It gives us, a small country, a voice among equals, not in terms of size, Gross Domestic Policy, or political clout, but in shaping global policymaking, in pursuing common goals and in the defence of shared values.

It is precisely my conviction that there is no viable alternative to an effective multilateral system. This sets me questioning how to improve the existing system, in order to ensure it is not attacked, endangered or undermined.

I will take again COVID as an example.

International bodies have come under attack for their delayed responses, for the lack of coordination, for the slow roll-outs of protective gear, and later on, irregular supplies of vaccines.

The European Union faced these arguments, when at the peak of the first wave of pandemic last year, images from Northern Italy were getting more dramatic day by day.

The same applies for the World Health Organisation, which came under attack in some quarters with unfounded accusations on the way it handled the pandemic.

It is especially in times of crises, such as this, that multilateralism is most necessary and effective. It is the only mechanism that can deter individual countries from looking first and foremost at their own interests, sometimes to the detriment of others.

We have also seen multilateral fora, like the United Nations and its bodies or agencies, being criticised and even facing membership withdrawals by countries with clear unilateral agendas of their own.

In order to achieve a balanced and fair international order – we have to improve it.

To begin with, we need to have a functioning, and relevant United Nations. We need a body that has the adequate tools and is empowered to both respond effectively and prevent international crises. In other words, we must have a United Nations with teeth!

If we look at what has happened in the recent past, the record is rather worrying, not because the United Nations itself did not have the capacity to intervene, but because of the veto mechanism in the Security Council paralysing the organisation into inaction.

Resolutions are agreed upon, but then vetoed and the result is impunity of a perpetrator for years on end.

The grave situations we continue witnessing in Syria and Yemen, and now in the Tigray region in Ethiopia, come to mind.

The discussion on reforming the United Nations, particularly the Security Council, has been going on for years now, mostly to modernise a post-World War II set up into one that reflects today's geopolitical realities.

There is no hard and fast answer as to what the solution should be, but the time has come for a serious discussion and reparative action on the composition and voting mechanism in this world body.

It is legitimate to ask why hundreds of thousands are left to suffer and perish from violence or malnutrition, simply because Security Council members resort to their vetoing power, very possibly for their own international and regional calculated interests.

This is the power of the big five. On the other hand, we have to acknowledge that there are also successes, as timid as they might be, to acknowledge within the United Nations.

A case in point is the situation in Libya that has stabilised the moment the United Nations decided to act and to seriously increase its involvement that country. Its consistent and well-calibrated outreach enabled this country to now set a deadline for elections at the end of this year, on the basis of an agreed legal and constitutional framework.

To round up my thinking on this point, the United Nations has to regain its strength, its relevance and its prominence in world affairs.

Malta is ready and prepared to do its part and has launched its campaign to take up a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for the years 2023 - 2024.

This two-year mandate will hopefully see Malta join nine other non-permanent members at the United Nations' highest table, provided it wins the elections for this post scheduled for 2022. This would be the second time for Malta to serve in this role, following a previous two-year term on the Security Council in 1983.

Our long history in defence of democracy and rule of law, stand us in good stead.

Through participation in the United Nations Security Council, we will work with other Members towards the achievement of peace through dialogue, de-escalation of conflict and disarmament, gender equality and women's rights, peace and security, as well as education, better health facilities, sustainable development and a holistic address to the problems brought about by climate change.

In brief, Malta at the United Nations Security Council, will be a voice for justice, for moderation, for understanding and for tolerance.

I will now turn to an issue that is central to global instability. I am referring to the issue of the proliferation and the trafficking of armaments and ammunition. I intentionally link this to evident or latent double standards that continue to undermine international stability.

Prominent actors sitting on decision-making bodies, calling for the full implementation of Arms Embargos, are themselves the world's largest arms exporters.

The more sceptical amongst us will draw a straight line and speak openly of an evident lack of morals, if not outright hypocrisy, in the conduct of international foreign policy when it comes to trade in arms and in ammunition.

The provision of armaments is almost always intrinsically linked to a political foothold in a zone of conflict or tensions, for the long-term benefits of the suppliers.

I am not here talking about nuclear warheads or intercontinental ballistic missiles. I am referring to small arms and light weapons.

In Libya's case, the provision of armaments to the disputing Eastern and Western factions, was directly linked to the immediate geopolitical, and long-term economic gains of the external suppliers who were looking after their own interests and not those of the Libyan people themselves.

Each for their own gains, and to the detriment of the people of Libya, who have for a decade endured instability, tensions and at times open conflict. Arms procurement has been a major stumbling block towards effective political dialogue.

The issue of arms control is a central issue in almost all conflicts around the globe and deserves increased international attention. There is an evident urgent need for disarmament, and for strict and credible controls on the sale and provision of small arms, light weapons, and ammunition which create and sustain regional conflicts, displace whole civilian populations, bring about humanitarian crises, deaths of innocent people, and escalation of poverty and misery.

Only serious controls taken at an international level can bring the lucrative trade in weapons and ammunition to an effective halt. By addressing, and hopefully eliminating, the trafficking of both armaments and ammunition, we will reduce markedly the chances of conflict.

On the nuclear front, I hope we have not lost the Iran nuclear deal, referred to as the JCPOA of 2015. Until recently, it was considered a landmark in non-proliferation history. We should not abandon this deal, not only for its merits in terms of non-proliferation, but also in the interest of regional stability in the Gulf and beyond.

We should also not forget the persistent threat of chemical and biological weapons, which allegedly continue to be used in present-day conflicts, causing unspeakable harm to exposed populations.

Now let me turn to the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030. One of the most pertinent questions to pose in our discussion about the state of the world, relates to the effects of the COVID-19 virus on global sustainability, and the targets we have set ourselves for the coming years, to be reached in 9 years' time.

The full-scale effect of COVID-19 on Sustainable Development Goals at the national, regional, and global levels is yet to be determined.

There is little doubt that COVID-19 is affecting negatively the achievement of several of these SDGs. Its impact on communities, society, and the global economy more widely will lead to an increased number of poor people and people at risk of poverty, putting the achievement of SDG1 (*No Poverty*) in danger.

It is also to be expected that the economic crisis will lead to a rise in unemployment and in the number of people in precarious work situations, hindering thus the achievement of SDG8, which is *Decent work and economic growth*.

Regrettably, we have also witnessed the worsening situations of vulnerable groups, such as women and children. Again, putting at risk another SDG, which is SDG5, which is *Gender equality*.

The recession caused by the COVID-19 response is alarming and has made researchers question whether we can speak with confidence about the SDGs in the post-pandemic age.

Paradoxically, in my view, the SDGs, with their universal scope, interlinked nature, and drive to leave no one behind, will be more essential than ever during and after this pandemic. Their relevance in these circumstances has been multiplied.

If anything, the COVID-19 crisis demonstrates the need to integrate even more the SDGs at the national and grassroots level.

At the same time, this global crisis reveals the pressing basic ‘community needs’ because these are immediate in their urgency, in contrast to the 2030 target of the SDGs.

I am referring to lack of health insurance, reduced access to basic needs such as oxygen and water during lockdown situations, or underlying chronic diseases which have suddenly become factors that determine chances of survival or not.

It is therefore imperative that governments increasingly invest in critical public goods and the provision of basic services like healthcare, clean water and education which should help build resilience and resistance.

I hope that the toll that the pandemic has taken on all of us teaches us a good lesson. We have, as global citizens, the duty to protect the most vulnerable and to leave no one behind.

In addressing these other challenges to global stability, national borders become meaningless. There are no national solutions to this pandemic, and even less so, ‘patriotic’ solutions.

Coming to the end of my presentation, I want to emphasise that the topics I touched upon are just a few out of many.

Other topics, such as climate change, migration, human trafficking, terrorism, contraband, and lack of democracy are equally important when considering what needs to be done to have a better world.

Dear students and participants,

As you engage in discussions over the coming two days, I encourage you to use this opportunity to discuss and to reflect on how to put your skills and abilities to their best possible use. You should do this for your own success and advancement, but above all for the benefits of your communities.

My advice to all of you is to nurture the skills of reflection, of critical thinking, logical argumentation, respect, and solidarity, as you would be investing in your academic and professional accomplishments.

In your discussions, results are only achieved by persuasion and not by coercion.

These basic qualities are not only necessary for well-grounded leadership in politics and diplomacy, but are also the fundamental qualities that will make respected and valued citizens of the world out of you.

I wish you all the best.

Thank you for your attention.