

The end of humankind's dream? The United Nations in the 21st century

Address given by Former Federal President Horst Köhler

**at the official ceremony hosted by the United Nations Association of Germany to mark
the 70th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations,**

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I.

A few months ago, when the United Nations Association of Germany invited me to speak at this event to mark the 70th anniversary of the creation of the UN, I was initially sceptical. Is there really any reason to celebrate, apart from a chronological coincidence and our human attachment to round numbers? And hasn't everything already been said 70 times over and more? Haven't we already heard all the hymns of praise – and the funeral dirges – for the United Nations, the far-sighted analyses, the brilliant proposals for reform? Do we really need more insights? Don't we rather need the will to translate these insights into practice? Do we not yearn for the strength of silence in these cacophonous times, and then may actions speak louder than words?

Yet, as you can see, I am here. I did accept the invitation. I accepted it, because I believe that engaging with the United Nations forces us to think seriously about some of the fundamental questions of humanity. And it is now more important to do so than it has ever been. I know that many of you are already deeply committed to and actively involved in this process of reflection and have never allowed yourselves to be discouraged by the sheer immensity and complexity – both moral and political – of the issues involved. And that is why I am happy to have the opportunity to share in that reflection with you this evening.

The 70th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations is also important to me on a personal level, as I realised when I came to prepare this address. One reason is that I was part of the UN family during my time as Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), albeit not part of the UN system in the strictest sense. Another is my recent involvement in the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. But beyond these reasons, the UN is a personal issue for me because I was born in the final chaotic throes of the very war that the UN was created to prevent from happening again. When the San Francisco Conference opened in April 1945, I was just two. Seventy years on, I also ask myself: what has the human race actually achieved in my lifetime?

The founding of the United Nations is not a particularly prominent date in our *collective* German memory. We were not a member in 1945, and nor were almost three quarters of its current Member States. The two German states, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, did not join until 1973. Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that the founding of the United Nations has a direct link to German history and to the terrible war that Germany unleashed on the world, bringing it to the edge of the abyss. Against this backdrop, I consider it only right and proper that Germany has for decades been one of the strongest advocates of the United Nations and one of the major contributors to it; and I am grateful for the tireless work of the United Nations Association of Germany in ensuring that Germany's commitment does not flag.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you may already suspect, I am not here today to sing the praises of the UN. My song, too, is a lament – what else could we sing today? – but it is also a song of gratitude and a song of hope.

Anyone scrutinising the United Nations cannot fail to see both promise and disillusionment, heaven and abyss. The United Nations mirrors humankind with all its failings and all its potential. These contradictions, the propensity for both good and evil, the altruism and the egotism, are the very core of our humanity. So it is that the United Nations, 'We, the peoples', is itself riddled with contradictions. On the one hand we see nation states which assure one another of their equality and inviolability. Yet on the other, we see the longing for a global authority with the ability to solve global problems free of the constraints of specific national interests. On the one hand is the need for participation to be as broad as possible and, on the other, the desire for an organisation that is effective and decisive. On the one hand, the UN claims to be a project that embodies universal and incontrovertible norms while on the other, it attempts to recognise the diversity and variety of the world's many cultures. And over all this hovers the dramatic and painful contradiction between what the UN is supposed to be and what it actually is, between vision and reality. It is these contradictions and tensions that shape the UN, not just today but since its inception.

II.

Many of the inherent contradictions that irritate us today were in fact already part of the United Nations Organization when it was created. It is now almost a cliché to say that the 1945 structure of the United Nations simply no longer reflects 21st century realities. True though this is, it cannot hide the fact that many of the arguments we hear today when the future of the UN is discussed are the same arguments that dominated the debate 70 years ago. It is possible that the imperfections and contradictions that we now find so frustrating were clearly visible to many of those involved back in 1945 – but that the UN that was founded then simply represented the best possible outcome of the negotiations at that time. It is very easy for us today to underestimate the enormous political tour de force represented by the 1945 San Francisco Conference.

The top priority was to not permit another failure like the League of Nations which did not prevent the Second World War. The United Nations was created not to take mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell, as Dag Hammarskjöld later put it. The aim was to preserve peace at any price – even where that price was imperfect justice between states. This ethos is reflected in the Charter of the United Nations, which is a paradoxical mixture of realpolitik and idealism.

Take, for instance, the question of the right of veto on the Security Council (then, as now, the most controversial component of the structure of the UN) and thus the question of the equality of nations. On 7 May 1945, the New York Times commented: “The smaller nations have reluctantly accepted the idea of a virtual world dictatorship by the great powers, for the time at least, because they know that they cannot have a world organization, in view of war conditions and the present state of the world in general, without letting the big powers run it. And the little countries want a world organization very badly”. Meanwhile, for the large states, especially the USA and the Soviet Union, it was inconceivable that they as military powers could be part of a Security Council that could authorise peace missions without a veto.

From today’s perspective, the scale of the human, financial and intellectual resources mobilised by the USA in particular to ensure the success of the United Nations seems almost unreal. This was in no small part the result of the personal commitment and enthusiasm of Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. President Roosevelt was so convinced by the idea of the United Nations that not even a naked Winston Churchill could dissuade him: the story is that when Winston Churchill was visiting the White House in 1941 in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US President barged into his room in his wheelchair one evening, just as Churchill was in the bath, and unperturbed by the situation, shouted enthusiastically ‘United Nations.’ The British Prime Minister is reported to have been equally unperturbed and answered succinctly, ‘Good.’ That at least resolved the question of what the new organisation was to be called. FDR, who had apparently even toyed with the idea of resigning as President to become the first Secretary-General of the United Nations, tragically did not live to see the birth of ‘his’ United Nations, as he died just two weeks before the founding conference in San Francisco began. The very first decision taken by the new President Truman, just hours after he was suddenly and unexpectedly sworn in, was that the Conference should proceed as planned. While still Vice President, Truman always carried in his wallet an 1837 poem that describes the vision of a ‘parliament of man’, a ‘federation of the world’ in which ‘common sense’ and ‘universal law’ would hold sway.

Naturally, though, Truman never doubted that the USA would play a leading role, even if he stressed in his inaugural address to Congress that the responsibility of large states was to serve the world and not to dominate it. The rather particular American interpretation of the term ‘to serve’ is, however, illustrated by the fact that, for example, the secret service spared no effort in bugging and spying on all the foreign delegations in San Francisco. Nothing was to be left to chance in the creation of the new world order of peace.

The founding of the United Nations 70 years ago was not something that could be taken for granted. It was the result of political will, courageous vision and tough pragmatism.

It is thanks to that vision, the will to negotiate, and the negotiating skills of those who hammered out the Charter of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945 that the UN has survived to this day in spite of all its inherent paradoxes, that it has weathered the stormiest of seas, and that it has developed from an organisation founded by a few dozen victorious nations to a genuinely global organisation that embraces all states.

We should be truly grateful today that the generation of the 1940s managed to find the strength to take a step of this magnitude, in spite of the fact that Europe lay in ruins, that millions had lost their lives and that millions more had been forced to leave their homes and were living as refugees. This generation was beginning to realise the dream of peace even before the war was over and at a time when the first clouds of the Cold War were already gathering on the horizon. And that ought to be food for thought for today's major powers in particular. For all its faults, the successful creation of the United Nations should encourage those who are tempted to despair in the face of the magnitude and complexity of the work at multilateral level. It is a salutary reminder to all those who once again seek salvation by retreating behind the nation state and to all those who see their own defeatism as realism, their lack of political vision as *realpolitik*.

III.

The first of the three contradictions which I would like to look at in more detail also involves *realpolitik* (or what many consider to be *realpolitik*). Before the United Nations was founded, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argued that “nations cannot create a new universal sovereignty above themselves by a pure fiat of will and then turn around and subject themselves to this sovereignty”. He pinpointed the fundamental paradox of an international organisation of sovereign states. Is the UN more than the sum of its parts? It is subject to the collective will of its Member States yet also an independent subject in its own right. Kofi Annan often pointed this out when criticism was directed at the UN; ‘Which UN do you mean?’, he would riposte.

The United Nations Security Council has become symbolic of this dilemma. It is not intended to be a club for the privileged few: according to the Charter of the United Nations, the role of the members of the Security Council is to act *on behalf of* all Member States and thus *in the interests of* all Member States. What a stark contrast this represents with the blatant pursuit of national interests and power play generally seen in the Security Council! Using the Security Council as a means of pushing through the interests of individual states is one of the fundamental problems faced by the UN and often paralyses the international community in its most important role, that of peace-keeping. Whether in Iraq or Libya, circumvention of the Security Council or the wilful misinterpretation of its mandate have seriously undermined the UN's credibility, with major powers signalling loud and clear that some rules need not be respected. Even more importantly, the international community's political control mechanism has failed – the mechanism that was intended to protect the world from foolhardy and dangerous interventionist policies. What we have seen in its place over the last decade is an interventionist policy whose short-sightedness, even incompetence, is breath-taking. Millions of men, women and children, especially in the Middle East, are now paying the price – and, of course, it is again primarily left to the UN to sort things out.

The UN often finds itself in a quandary – either it is circumvented entirely or Member States fail to give it the resources to enable it to implement Security Council resolutions. We are familiar with the various proposals that have been made for reform, with their pros and cons, and we know how likely they are to be realised. And I am sure that others are far better qualified than I to analyse them in detail. What I am more concerned to do today is to look at what is understood by sovereignty and national interest, the concepts that underpin the tension between the idea of a global authority and the independence of nation states.

In view of the violent attacks launched by states against other states, the vision of absolute national sovereignty was a powerful one and manifestly in the interests of all. It was also the driving force behind the independence movements in the states that subsequently became full members of the UN from the 1960s. I would like to emphasise this point because, for all our cosmopolitan optimism, we need to be reminded regularly that the vision of a *global government* to which nation states would be *subordinate* will not realistically command majority support in the foreseeable future. We need only to consider the political culture in the USA, where the very concept of ‘government’ is seen as a necessary evil.

Nevertheless, reality also shows us that the sovereignty of nation states is bumping up against its limits. Firstly, the world has an increasing number of fragile states, which retain no more than a shell of statehood and have long since lost control over their territory, an essential precondition for sovereignty. Secondly, the painful and bloody experiences in Rwanda and elsewhere have demonstrated only too clearly that it is important to protect not only the security of states and the inviolability of their territory but also, and especially, the safety and security of peoples and the inviolability of their dignity. This recognition has led to the concept of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, or R2P, according to which the international community has a duty to intervene in the case of crimes against humanity, even where this involves violating the sovereignty of a nation state. I believe it is a major achievement of the UN that in 2009, the General Assembly passed its first resolution on the Responsibility to Protect. However, precisely because this impinges on one of the fundamental principles of the system of independent states, it is vitally important that international law and given rules be scrupulously respected. This makes the abuse of R2P, say in Libya, so dramatic: it effectively discredits the entire concept.

Thirdly, however, the most important factor limiting the traditional understanding of sovereignty is the reality of interdependence: we face a long list of global challenges that do not respect national borders, including terrorism, Ebola, climate change, and migration. All these issues call for *global governance*, no longer simply to ensure that the nation-state vessels do not collide on their separate journeys but actually to coordinate global policy within the *same* boat in which we have all been sitting for some time now. This fact requires us to rethink the concept of national interests, because our interests have long been so interwoven and interconnected that there is a genuine global interest, a global common good.

And this brings us back to the starting point of our reflection – how can the UN defend this global common good if its authority depends on power delegated to it by nation states?

The following thoughts may help us here. The founding of the United Nations was not merely an act of collective self-empowerment: it was also an act of collective self-imposed limitations. Pope Francis pointed this out in his memorable address to the General Assembly. He stressed that all the achievements of the UN are lights which help to dispel the darkness of the disorder caused by unrestrained ambitions and collective forms of selfishness. ‘Certainly, many grave problems remain to be resolved, yet it is clear that without all those interventions on the international level, mankind would not have been able to survive *the unchecked use of its own possibilities*’, he said.

Multilateralism, for which there is no alternative when it comes to addressing global problems, can work only within a logical system of cooperation and *self-imposed limitations*. This applies most particularly to powerful states, which must not do everything they are capable of doing.

Our longing for a strong formal authority capable of ensuring and enforcing this will remain unfulfilled, however. That makes it all the more important that the political class understands that in an interdependent world, we can survive only by acting together. And I believe that this awareness is spreading, at least within civil society.

It is the awareness that if multilateralism fails, it is not only our *humanity* that is the victim, as we have seen in Rwanda, in Srebrenica and now in Syria. If multilateralism fails, then ultimately, *humankind* as a whole will fail. Climate change, which threatens our very existence, is a mere harbinger of what is to come.

IV.

Insight alone is not enough, though. We also need to act. And that brings me to the second inherent contradiction: the United Nations has, from the outset, tried to reconcile its claim to enable maximum participation with its efforts to act effectively. This applies to the long-running dispute over which organ should be given greater power: the General Assembly, which reflects the principle of universal participation, or the Security Council, which in theory at least should be better able to make decisions because of the smaller number of members. Then again, should the voting rights within the General Assembly and the Security Council be modified to achieve fairer participation while at the same time ensuring greater effectiveness? As you can see, it is akin to trying to square the circle.

Positioned somewhere between these poles is also the UN as an independent organisation or, rather, as an organisational network: it has spawned a large number of programmes and sub-agencies that are linked and interconnected – or perhaps ‘entangled’ might be a better way of expressing the relationships. The UN structure is more like a bowl of spaghetti than an orderly network. Each individual organisation, at the time of its creation, might well have filled a gap and met a specific need for greater breadth, but because no effort was made to abolish or clearly restructure any other part of the system at the same time, the overall system today is byzantine and ridiculously bureaucratic. One system has been planted onto another, with yet another on top of that. There are now so many overlaps and so much duplication that the United Nations sometimes needs most of its energy to work against itself.

A great many people have already tried – and failed – to bring order to this costly and ineffective chaos. At the very start of his term of office, Kofi Annan managed to introduce some financial and managerial reforms within the Secretariat, but no action has yet been taken on the most important of his proposed reforms, presented in 2005 in the report ‘In Larger Freedom’ and in 2006 in the report of the High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence. As is so often the case, the vested interests of Member States underlie the structural sclerosis. The small states especially, and in particular developing countries, fear that efficiency drives and streamlining will at the end leave only white Westerners in post. If we take a hard look at the way the large, rich Member States consider it perfectly natural to share out the top jobs at the large sub-agencies among themselves, this fear does not appear unreasonable or unjustified. (And, of course, the tradition that the World Bank must be headed by an American and the IMF by a European has long been an anachronism.)

There is no doubt that the top job at the United Nations is that of the Secretary-General, the ‘secular pope’ as one of the greatest of their number, Dag Hammarskjöld, once put it. All the contradictions of the UN come together in the post of the Secretary-General, whose role is to serve the Member States but to still embody the UN’s global authority, to be a diplomatic genius and at the same time be a shrewd technocrat who can keep this mammoth organisation under control, to be able to simultaneously speak out and keep calm. The UN has seen some incumbents who came close to matching these ideals, others who from the outset were not up to the job, and still others who were ground down by the constantly conflicting interests. If the nomination and selection process could be made a little more transparent, and if it could be prised away from the major powers, who sometimes make very little effort to conceal their cynical interest in ensuring that the Secretary-General is as weak as possible, then the UN might at last be able to better tap its reservoir of strengths.

Of course, that assumes that the aim is actually to ensure a strong UN ...

The very fact that the organisation still produces so many reports that are destined only for the wastepaper basket makes it obvious that not only the Member States but also the UN itself lacks the will to take seriously and make use of its own intellectual reserves. I myself have experienced this first hand. When, during the first meeting of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Agenda, I naively asked whether the previous expert and panel reports of the UN on the various relevant topics had been analysed to ensure continuity of content, I was stared at as though I had just proposed that the next Secretary-General be elected via Facebook. It was very clear that there was no intention of building on previous discussion processes as an expression of the learning culture within the UN or as a sign of intellectual self-respect. This mind-set is not exactly conducive to bolstering the coherence of the UN as an organisation that thinks independently.

Let me just mention two last points with respect to the eternal struggle between participation and effectiveness within the UN.

Firstly, I believe that new media and the astonishing new levels of professionalism within international civil society will usher in a participation revolution that will change the United Nations along with other organisations – and for the better. And it will change not because of

pseudo-participation created at enormous bureaucratic cost but because the collective intelligence and competition for the best ideas at grassroots level will, in many places, be able to square the circle between participation and effectiveness. One example of how this might work in practice is the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, which owes its existence above all to an extremely tough and extremely creative coalition of global civil society and a few pioneer states. However, this will also require NGOs, themselves no strangers to narrow-mindedness and self-centeredness, to rethink their own roles.

Secondly, in the participation versus effectiveness debate too, only self-imposed limitations will achieve a fruitful balance. The cake will go round only if people sometimes hold back from demanding a slice when issues are discussed or jobs shared out. New behaviour patterns can, though, be expected only when an atmosphere of mutual trust has been established – trust among states and trust in the organisation. Trust is the most important political capital at international level but also the least valued. I am not advocating blind, naïve trust in others, but I am calling on each party to ensure its own credibility. Before trust can take root, I believe a new dialogue on values in international politics is indispensable, and that brings me to the third fundamental paradox of the United Nations.

V.

The final area of conflict I would like to look at today relates to values.

Ultimately, is the UN's claim to represent universal values and standards not in fact a Western project? How can universality be reconciled with respect for cultural diversity?

The debate about the universal nature of human rights is as old as the idea itself, and these are questions that would in themselves be worthy of an evening-long address. Nevertheless, I want to take just a cursory look at them, although I am very well aware that the scope for misunderstandings in this area is huge. Yet the question of common values and the diversity of cultures so directly affects the way the UN sees itself that I cannot sidestep the issue today.

Firstly, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights did not merely define the United Nations as a partnership of convenience but clearly laid down the normative direction it was to take. We have to be grateful to Eleanor Roosevelt, who was instrumental in creating the Declaration in her capacity as Chairwoman of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. She remains one of only a handful of women to have left their mark on the history of the UN (and there can be no doubt that a female Secretary-General would do the UN good). The Declaration explicitly tackles the fundamental tension enshrined in the Charter – that between the absolute sovereignty of individual states and the principle of non-intervention on the one hand, as I have already mentioned, and the commitment to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms on the other. This imposes limitations on state actions that relate not only to relations between states but also to the way states deal with their own citizens.

Kofi Annan once pointed out that he overwhelmingly heard the argument that civil liberties and fundamental human rights were a Western concept from *governments*, rather than from individual citizens. No individual wants to go to prison because of their faith, and no girl would maintain that being denied the chance to go to school was part of her culture. The

United Nations has, therefore, always been the advocate of the millions, nay billions, of people whose human dignity is violated by poverty and a lack of freedom; the UN is the ally of the marginalised, including – and, indeed, especially – vis à vis individual Member States. By way of a reminder, the UN General Assembly was one of Nelson Mandela's most active allies outside South Africa in his efforts to delegitimise the apartheid system. And the human rights conventions, from the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which have been ratified by the overwhelming majority of Member States, have established global standards that citizens in South and North alike can demand of their governments. The argument, then, that human rights fail to respect cultural diversity is wide of the mark; indeed, the aim is precisely to protect the diversity of human existence.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that we can afford to hide behind the formal argument that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, not to mention the human rights conventions, all of which have been signed by almost all non-Western states, demonstrate that there is no further need to discuss the shared fundamental values of humankind. The challenges are too great and the existing consensus clearly too fragile. We have still to find a good way of accommodating diversity and different visions of development and coexistence within society in our modern world. The cultural arrogance of the West that we occasionally saw following the collapse of the Soviet Union was and remains largely unhelpful. We face the urgent task of developing collective empathy within our networked family on Earth on the basis of a shared understanding of common values, so that we can be more than just a global society forced to solidarity and yoked together by the cross-border problems facing us. And we need this global awareness to give greater precedence to long-term policies that are geared to ensuring that the opportunities of the future generations are not jeopardised. Where better to address this task than within the United Nations?

We in the West need have no fear of a dialogue on values nor should we try to circumvent it because we find it inconvenient. We must be open, listen and learn – not in order to water down or relativise human rights, but to build on them. We could learn from the more collective societal models that we see in many African and Asian cultures and from the idea of human responsibilities that goes back to Gandhi and was enshrined in the 1997 'Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities' by individuals including Helmut Schmidt, Jimmy Carter and Lee Kuan Yew.

The notion that values exist that are shared by all people from every culture and every religion – a world ethic – has been explored, for instance, by Hans Küng, who devoted his life in an exemplary fashion to research into religion. The notion of a world ethic is still so relevant today, still so explosive, in fact, that we cannot allow it to be reduced to technocratic UN jargon. We must find a language that resonates across cultures. Let us not stifle the debate about common values in our efforts to phrase everything in a way that will cause no offence in our liberal and progressive societies. I, for one, would be very suspicious of a UN that sounded like a Western European NGO.

Should we not, in any case, be wary of any global value system that creates no friction here in the West, generates no impetus for change? Human rights and the fundamental standards that go hand in hand with them are not some sort of folklore that can be used to educate developing countries and evil dictatorships – they are, first and foremost, an undertaking and a commitment! What I said earlier about failure to respect the rules with respect to international law obviously applies also to human rights. The greatest threat to universal standards comes not from those who challenge their very existence but from those who stridently defend them while flagrantly breaching them. And this is where I expect the West to have a critical conversation with itself. I am still rendered speechless by the nerve with which the USA has attempted to justify its policy of torture and by the detached indifference with which Europe has responded. These are things that have inflicted enormous damage on the credibility of multilateralism as an attempt to set standards for behaviour.

When I consider the friction that would be caused in the West by taking seriously the demand for universal human dignity, I rapidly run up against our lifestyle. A mere 20 per cent of the world's population consumes 80 per cent of the planet's resources. If everybody on Earth consumed resources at the rate we do, we would need to have several planets available to us. If we take this idea to its logical conclusion, the normative project that the United Nations represents must also call into question our economic and societal system, including forms of capitalism that care nothing for resource consumption and pollution. The German-American philosopher Vittorio Hösle put this question to every single one of us, when he argued that, since universal applicability is the principle of modern ethics, the realisation that our lifestyle is not universally applicable can, by modernity's own yardstick, mean nothing other than that it is immoral.

What we need, then, is a new vision of self-imposed limitations, not at the political level but at the material level. It is not a question of 'ecological Calvinism' as Peter Sloterdijk once jibed. It is a question of whether we might enhance our quality of life by making our happiness less dependent on material factors and escaping the hamster wheel of spiralling consumption. It is possible if we initiate not only an efficiency revolution in the way we produce but also a sufficiency revolution in the way we live. The success of a sufficiency revolution of this sort could depend ultimately (and here I once again allude to Vittorio Hösle) on our readiness to define our own success not in terms of the level of our needs but, conversely, to draw the feeling of our own dignity from the limitation of our own needs.

VI.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I forgot to warn you at the start of my address that I do not plan to present a programme for reforming the United Nations this evening. Yet in this last part of my address, I come now to a matter that I believe offers a huge opportunity for the future of humankind and for the United Nations, although it makes no claim to offer answers to all the questions I have raised here today.

As you have probably guessed, I am referring to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted four weeks ago in New York after several years of hard work.

The 2030 Agenda, hitherto known by its working title as the ‘Post-2015 Agenda’, carries forward the idea of the Millennium Development Goals drawn up in 2001. It is a list not of 8 but of 17 global development goals, together with 169 sub-goals, that the global community aims to achieve by 2030.

Like every plan finalised after protracted discussion, the Agenda has its critics, who are already lining up to find fault with it. ‘Too ambitious!’ cry the realists; ‘Not ambitious enough!’ cry the idealists. Meanwhile, many others are already so indifferent that they don’t cry anything at all, firmly convinced that this is another UN process destined only for the wastepaper basket. Naturally, the notion of 169 sub-goals gives me a headache, too. Yet if we consider all the contradictions that the UN has to contend with, the outcome is not a bad compromise. Of course, this Agenda cannot solve the dilemma that sovereign states cannot subject themselves to a higher authority controlling progress on achieving the goals. The 2030 Agenda is, therefore, based on voluntary commitments and on the hope that mutual accountability and constant pressure from civil society will generate enough willingness to embrace change.

What is much more important than all these imperfections, which are inherent in any compromise reached by 193 states, is, I believe, the consensus enshrined in this Agenda. And some fundamental facts encourage me.

Firstly, world leaders have agreed that extreme poverty must be eradicated by 2030 – and that this is feasible. Recently, I was asked whether I really believe that this is realistic. Yes, I do! Humankind has all the knowledge, all the financial resources and all the technology it needs to end extreme poverty, and it would have been a sad reflection if we had said, ‘Oh, I don’t think we should stretch that far.’ Today, the issue of global poverty is primarily a question of political will, and I very much hope that national and international civil society will not let up in their efforts to keep reminding their governments of the will they announced in September 2015. Although this Agenda is one to which the United Nations as an organisation has pledged its commitment, it is first and foremost an Agenda of the Member States.

And it is an Agenda of *all* the Member States. This is the second consensus that emerges from these goals. We cannot eradicate extreme poverty at the cost of wrecking the environment of our planet. To avert this danger, we need change everywhere, East and West, North and South. The 2030 Agenda is, therefore, not a development programme for poor countries but a universal agenda for transformation: it underlines the responsibility of the industrialised countries as well – indeed, *particularly* of the industrialised countries, as I see it, which must change their production and consumption patterns.

I see the UN’s new list of goals as an opportunity to offer a strategic alternative to the current state of the world, marked as it is by extreme inequality, climate change, conflicts, wars and refugee crises – the alternative of a global partnership, i.e. cooperation for mutual benefit and for the global common good. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development could then be an expression of the ‘commonly applied reason’ called for decades ago by Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker or of the ‘common sense’ in the parliament of man from Truman’s favourite poem, written in 1837. I am very interested to see to what extent German politicians will embrace this ‘common sense’ agenda. There is plenty of work in progress. Will we manage to implement the efficiency and sufficiency revolution?

I think it possible that the 2030 Agenda can make the United Nations a genuinely universal organisation that achieves long-term worldwide transformation towards sustainability and prosperity for all rather than being reduced to the role of fire-fighter during humanitarian crises. The mandate is clear. Actions must now follow words. Can this generation of world leaders demonstrate the courage and leadership shown by their predecessors in 1945?

VII.

Ladies and gentlemen,

70 years after the UN was founded amid the ruins of the Second World War, the world needs a strong United Nations more than ever before. Of course, the UN in its current form is in no way adequate to the enormous global challenges of our time and the need for *global governance*. But it will take time to cut through the Gordian knot and achieve comprehensive reform. The UN can be seen as the densest of the levels we must drill through, slowly and patiently, tackling several different areas simultaneously. Some contradictions will never be resolved: that is the nature of humankind and politics, especially international politics. It would, then, be a mistake to take the UN seriously only on condition that it reforms itself. We need to turn that assumption on its head: reform becomes possible when Member States once again take multilateralism and, with it, the United Nations seriously, and when they are willing to invest genuine political capital.

I cherish the hope that insight into the needs arising from interdependence will help Member States, especially the large and wealthy ones, to view their national interests in a new light. Interdependence forces us to cooperate. If we refuse, the problems will rebound twice as hard. The current refugee crisis is evidence enough. Have we heard the wake-up call?

I would like to conclude with the words of one man who has left a greater mark on the UN than most others and whose moral authority remains intact – Dag Hammarskjöld. When I read the words he wrote in 1953, I am not sure whether I felt greater admiration for a man who was so far ahead of his time or greater astonishment that his words are still so relevant 50 years on. Either way, it really has all been said before.

Dag Hammarskjöld, then: “When trying to change the world, we must take it as it is. Those are lost who dare not face the basic facts of international interdependence. Those are lost who permit defeats to scare them back to a starting point of narrow nationalism. Those who are lost who are so scared by a defeat as to despair about the future. For all those, the dark prophecies may be justified. But not for those who do not permit themselves to be scared, not for the organisation which is the instrument at their disposal in the fight – an instrument which may be wrecked, but, if that happens, would have to be, and certainly would be, recreated again and again.” Thank you.