

Speech: Global Britain-supporting the Rules Based International System

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining me on my first visit to the Philippines as UK Minister for Asia.

More than 70 years after the bombs, artillery and guns of World War II fell silent, academics and historians continue to debate the number of people killed.

Some put the number of deaths worldwide at 45 million. Others believe the number of Chinese casualties alone may have exceeded that number. The people of the Philippines undoubtedly paid a very dear price, with up to one million Filipinos killed – around 1 in every 16 people – considerably more than the losses we suffered in the UK.

In the aftermath of such a devastating conflict, the instinctive response across much of the globe was to set about building a new set of rules and cooperative institutions, to reduce the risk of such large scale slaughter happening again.

The United Nations was the clearest demonstration of the global will to do things differently – not only between states themselves, but also between states and their people.

The Holocaust had made an absolutely compelling case for the need to strengthen the rights of individuals.

But it was also understood that the vicious brutality meted out by the occupying forces in Europe and Asia was in part a consequence of regimes with unchecked power at home.

It was understood that if a state did not respect the diversity of its people and their thoughts, beliefs and wishes, it was likely to be more unpredictable and dangerous beyond its borders.

So countries came together at the United Nations not only to draw up the rules, and the checks and balances of international peace and security, but also the rights and freedoms of all people, and each state's responsibility to guarantee those rights.

Over the last 70 years that international rule book has been strengthened and broadened within the UN, and through an increasing range of multilateral and regional organisations.

The global rule book now deals with so much more than the weapons we have and what happens when we misuse them.

It deals with how we trade together, and what happens if we renege on those terms. It helps protect the assets that our countries share – our air, our

water, our oceans. It helps protect our wildlife, and our national heritage – things that make our countries unique.

This rules-based system would have been unimaginable just one hundred years ago, when war and forceful occupation were still considered a legitimate approach to foreign policy.

Among other things, it has led to a reduction in the proportion of people living in poverty around the world from over 50% in the 1940s, to less than 10% today.

It is a rule book that has protected the sovereignty of the Philippines after centuries of occupation and enabled you to grow as an independent country.

Taken together, this Rules Based International System has had a hugely positive impact on global security and prosperity, protecting people and countries, and helping them to achieve their potential.

This is why the United Kingdom is working so hard with its international partners to cherish and protect these rules. And this is why we regret that the Philippines has decided to leave the International Criminal Court – an institution that we consider to be a cornerstone of the Rules-Based International System, because it makes all people safer. We believe that it needs the support of the whole international community and we are sure that the Philippines could make a great contribution.

Defending the Rules Based International System

And it is why we want to work with countries to tackle global challenges and build a more prosperous and stable future for us all.

Supporting and strengthening the Rules Based International System, so that countries and individuals have the freedom, security and mechanisms to prosper, is what drives our foreign policy.

That is why we are the only one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council that spends both 2% of our GDP on defence and 0.7% of GNI on development.

We take the responsibility of permanent membership incredibly seriously. That means being active across a huge range of issues.

We have played a prominent role – through the UN and EU – in strengthening and enforcing sanctions against North Korea to stop its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

We work to address crises, by providing humanitarian support for those caught up in them and by supporting efforts to end conflicts; we work with partners across the globe to tackle issues as diverse as violent extremism, sexual violence in conflict, human trafficking and modern slavery, and the illegal wildlife trade; and we campaign to promote girls' education.

In the past five years alone, UK aid has protected over 67 million children

against a range of preventable diseases.

If you look at the current humanitarian disasters – in Syria, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and Northeast Nigeria – you will find that the three biggest donors are the US, the UK, and the EU.

We have led financial contributions to address the crisis facing the Rohingya people of Burma, with £129 million of aid given to date. I saw the real difference this is making on the ground when I visited Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh a few weeks ago.

And you may not know that after Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in 2013, the UK government's £77 million contribution to the humanitarian support effort was greater than any other government in the world – representing 14% of global contributions.

Perhaps more remarkably, that figure was topped by donations from the British public of nearly £100 million.

Global Britain strengthening the Rules Based International System

Despite this track record, some commentators have chosen to interpret the decision of the British people to leave the European Union as a sign of our retreat from our global role.

This could not be further from the truth – being more internationalist is at the core of our vision for a post-Brexit Global Britain, and freeing ourselves of certain shackles that came with EU membership will enable us to realise our vision. Nowhere more so than in our approach to international trade.

Increasing trade, economic activity and employment is the best way to improve the lives of the world's poorest; just look how more than 500 million people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in China since the 1980s.

No region is more exciting in terms of the potential to increase trade than here in the Indo-Pacific; you have a third of the global economy, and around two thirds of the global population.

The Philippines is a good case-in-point, with 6.7% GDP growth last year, and the potential for more to come. That is why we are busily working to be more present, more active, and more engaged in this region.

I have visited around twenty countries across the region in my first year as Minister. In each one I have made the case for closer links between our governments, our businesses, and our people. We want to be a partner and friend with good relations with all the countries of this region – not choosing between them.

Our relationship with China is crucial now and it will be in the future. As will our deep and long-standing partnerships with Japan and India. And of course, those with Australia and New Zealand. But we need to do more.

So I can say this morning that after leaving the EU, we will be seeking to strengthen our relationship with ASEAN as an institution, and we will endeavour to further strengthen our relationship with the Philippines, building on longstanding relations which date back to Sir Francis Drake's landing in Mindanao in 1579.

We want to work in partnership to uphold and strengthen the Rules-Based International System in Asia, as elsewhere.

That is why we have stood shoulder to shoulder with Japan, South Korea and other countries in denouncing nuclear adventurism by North Korea. It is why we stand up for the rights of the people of Hong Kong and for the principle of – “One country, two systems”.

And it is why in the South China Sea we urge all parties to respect freedom of navigation and international law, including the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.

It is critical for regional stability, and for the integrity of the Rules-Based International System, that disputes in the region are resolved, not through force, militarisation or coercion, but through dialogue and in accordance with international law.

The UK is backing the Rules Based International System in Asia through our security cooperation as well as our humanitarian support and diplomacy. As one of the few countries able to deploy air power 7,000 miles from our shores, we recently sent our Typhoon fighter jets to train with Japan, South Korea, and Malaysia for the first time.

We have also deployed two Royal Navy ships to the region – HMS Sutherland and Albion, and soon also HMS Argyll – meaning we will have an almost unbroken naval presence in the strategically critical Asia-Pacific this year.

One of the first missions of our two vast new aircraft carriers will be to sail through the Straits of Malacca, the route that currently accommodates a quarter of global trade. Not because we have enemies in this region – but because we believe in upholding the rule of law.

Challenges to the Rules based International System

There are unfortunately some leaders who are intent on flouting and undermining the Rules Based International System.

In recent years many countries have fallen victim to Russian state aggression, destabilisation or interference.

There is no plausible alternative explanation than that the Russian state was responsible for the chemical attack against a former Russian spy in the English town of Salisbury in March, using Soviet-developed Novichok. It was the first time since the Second World War that a nerve agent had been deployed in continental Europe.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons agreed a UK proposal

last month, which should strengthen the ban on chemical weapons and prevent impunity for their use.

We were grateful to the 82 countries that supported the measures to reinforce a key plank of the Rules Based International System. We were disappointed that the Philippines, and 23 other countries, were not among them.

Conclusion

That brings me to my final point. The Rules Based International System is a network of agreements and institutions that requires our support if it is to continue to protect us and make us more prosperous.

If we stand back – perhaps in the hope of some possible short term gain – we will all be worse off in the long run.

The System is not the property of any one country or alliance of countries – but something that belongs to all of us. It has been built with the shared wisdom gleaned from our shared history.

That history has taught us that too often people have been held back by repression, corruption or authoritarianism. They have not had the opportunities, freedoms and protections to make the most of their talents and hard work.

In the future, as technology increasingly spreads opportunity, the societies that succeed will be the ones that enable all their citizens to fulfil their potential.

The Rules Based International System is the best friend for any person or country with unfulfilled potential. It is the duty of all of us to defend it. It is what I will work for. It is what the UK will work for. We hope you will too.