Address by
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On the Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century
at the United Nations Association of China
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I should like to thank you for this opportunity to share my views as President of the UN General Assembly on the Role of United Nations in this Century. As you may be aware it is the first time that Finland holds the Presidency of the Assembly, an honour that occurs about once in 200 years for any Member of the United Nations. As President I endeavour to do my best to advance the purposes and principles of the United Nations, as enshrined in the Charter, in order to promote peace and security, greater social equality, democracy and human rights, sustainable human development, the alleviation of poverty and combating global environmental threats.

It gives me great pleasure to start my official visit in China with a seminar at the United Nations Association of China and it fits very well with my priorities as President. Throughout my Presidency, I have stressed the important role civil society and organizations such as the UN Associations play in making the UN more relevant to the world outside. I was impressed when I learned before coming here about the variety of activities, that the UNA China has been involved in during the past year, including disseminating information about UN and making international contacts. I was also glad to note that you have had the opportunity to visit my own country Finland. I encourage you to continue your efforts.

The topic given to me is not easy, and I will not even attempt to answer it in full. But I will try to outline some observations that I have made during my time in office.

But let me add that while difficult the topic is indeed very timely in light of the follow-up to the historic Millennium Summit that took place last September. In fact the Summit presented us with the role for the UN in the 21st Century: the Declaration adopted at the end of the Summit lays down the global agenda for the United Nations for the years to come. I could simply refer you to the Declaration and end my address here. But as you might guess, based on the mere amount of paper I have with me, and remembering that I am a former politician I am tempted to expand a little more on this issue. And if you allow me, I will continue another bit to do so.

The Summit was the largest gathering ever of Heads of State and Government and it agreed on a set of values, principles and goals for the entire international community in the 21st century. Member States reaffirmed that the Organization is not meant to serve only Member States, but also the peoples of the world, in particular the most vulnerable. It laid down the fundamental values that guide our work: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. The Summit stressed the linkages between development, peace and security as well as the need to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for everyone.

Furthermore, the Summit provided momentum which will reinforce the implementation of the global agenda and its development targets, as defined in the global conferences of the 1990’s.
One of the issues where the Summit stressed the importance of the UN is globalization. The Organisation can play a critical role in making sure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all and offers benefits in a more equal manner. I should add that a key issue in globalization is how information and knowledge could be made available to all. This is of course a relevant question also in China. The United Nations has been active in this field for sometime through its specialized agencies and funds and programmes and the Economic and Social Council. The focus has been on the issue of bridging the so-called "digital divide", and making knowledge available and accessible to all.

The Summit also reaffirmed the key role that the UN plays in maintaining peace and security. The nature of conflicts has made this task even more complex and the question of improving the UN's capacity to respond more effectively to crises was one of the Summit's themes. The so-called Brahimi report contained specific recommendations to enhance the UN's capacity to conduct peace operations more effectively. In short it proposed that the UN be given the resources and tools it needs to carry out peace operations. The proposed reform is a comprehensive package, including additional resources, organizational and management changes as well as changes in the way the Security Council works. As President of the Assembly I urged Member States to consider the recommendations urgently. Member States saw this as an opportunity for the UN and its Member States to show that they were serious about enabling the Organisation to do the job it has been mandated by the Charter, namely that of maintaining international peace and security. The first emergency package of reforms was adopted last October, which was encouraging, but the work needs to continue.

Development and poverty eradication will have to remain high on the agenda of the UN for years to come. Many of the forthcoming conferences and Special Sessions will address these issues and I am hopeful that governments will adhere to their commitments made at the Summit and that we will see concrete results emerging from these and other events.

In light of the above the challenge, I believe, is to identify and develop the core strengths of the UN. This means also that the Organization needs to adapt constantly in order to respond to the new priorities established by its Membership.

Moreover, I believe that strengthening and revitalizing the Organization is in fact a prerequisite to achieving the priorities agreed in the Summit Declaration and to enabling the UN to carry out the tasks entrusted to it. Consequently, the pledge by Member States to spare no effort to make the UN a more effective instrument and to strengthen, becomes very important and urgent.