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Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing to you in my capacity as Chairman of the United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) to urge the Government to give priority to the need for an effective UN at a time when the international system is under increasing strain.

This year marks the UN's 70th anniversary. Since 1945, it has had a transformative impact on the world, from the promotion of dialogue between adversaries to the provision of essential services to the poorest and most vulnerable. For the UK, the development of a rules-based global order has delivered stability and prosperity, serving also to cement the UK in international power structures in a manner that has endured even as the global distribution of power has changed.

The UN's success, however, depends heavily on states' willingness to work together. The convergence of crises in recent years has demonstrated the urgent need for concerted and principled global action. But across the world, governments have been reluctant to respond through international cooperation, turning inwards instead to their domestic constituencies.

Our long period of global peace will not endure unless governments consciously will it to last. Political leadership, however, too often remains trapped in national agendas. International compromises, of the kind that made the establishment of the UN possible in 1945, still appear too costly when measured by the familiar criterion of national interest and we are now witnessing the fading effect of the UN's guiding principles in restraining nationalistic ambitions. The patterns of polarised thinking that led to the breakdown of relationships in the decade before the First World War are starting to be recognisable again.

The UK has not been immune to these developments. Over the past decade, UNA-UK has observed a disappointing reluctance to invest in a consistent and pro-active manner in the continuing health of the UN system. This approach does not recognise the implications of inaction for British citizens and the wider world. Our supporters across the UK are deeply concerned by this. Our longstanding members, who worked hard in post-war Britain to translate the UN's promise into practice, are frightened by the prospect of our international system breaking down. The younger generation, who will need to tackle the challenges that remain unresolved today, are worried about the legacy they are being bequeathed.

The UK's practical support to UN peacekeeping, for example, is at a 20-year low. There has been a narrowing in the definition of "national interest" and a drift in commitments to international norms. To date, the UK has taken in fewer refugees than it did in the previous decade, and there is an overwhelmingly negative debate on human rights laws, which British citizens fought hard to attain. At times, the UK has been absent from the international table, on occasion even playing an obstructive role at the UN, perhaps placing a higher priority on its relationship with the US than on finding collective solutions.

There are many commendable exceptions to this trend. The Government's championing of the Arms Trade Treaty and commitment to international development, as well as your personal engagement with the post-2015 agenda, demonstrate the UK's ability to lead by example with global impact.

The breakdown of the international system would have serious consequences for the UK's security and prosperity. It would also diminish the UK's global role and standing. The UN remains an indispensable tool for realising the UK's international objectives and support from the UK is necessary for UN initiatives to succeed. It will be some time before emerging powers are able – or willing – to match its diplomatic and military contributions. Disengagement would only serve to hasten the decline in UK influence.

By any objective measure, the UK remains one of the most powerful states at the UN. Its capacity to lead, its convening power and multilateral skill are well-suited to the modern political environment. It has the potential to play an important role in restoring communications between big powers, in forging diplomatic compromises and in championing practical solutions.

For the past year, UNA-UK has been running an initiative calling for greater foreign policy engagement and informed discussion of Britain's global role – the initiative has the support of thousands of individuals in all four nations of the UK (see enclosed communication).

We hope that the government you lead will recognise the urgent need to invest in global solutions, which we believe must include developing a clear strategy for UK engagement with the UN. The development of the new National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review provide opportunities to set this course.

We have provided the FCO, MOD and DFID with detailed recommendations for these forthcoming policy pronouncements, which we hope will:

- Emphasise the importance of effective global institutions to the UK's security and prosperity
- Recognise that this requires consistent and concerted UK leadership at the UN, in terms of strengthening the Organisation and engaging with states on the hardest issues, such as atrocity prevention and multilateral nuclear disarmament
- Make clear the need to address the root causes of threats to the UK, such as poverty and instability in countries that may not be considered priority interests
- Set out ways in which the UK can achieve this, for example, by increasing practical support to UN peace operations
- Commit the UK to upholding its international obligations and to setting a positive example in its implementation, at home and abroad, of international humanitarian and human rights laws and norms

By investing in the United Nations the UK can address national and global challenges that affect the everyday lives of people in this country and beyond. It can also ensure that it maintains its position in the international system.

On the eve of the UN's 70th anniversary, we ask you to take up the mantle of Winston Churchill, one of the Organisation's architects, who said this country's "constant aim must be to build and fortify the strength of the United Nations". The main message of this letter is to underscore the need for a pro-active and imaginative approach to the UN by the government.

I have asked UNA-UK not to make this letter public to allow for a response. In due course, the intention is to publish this exchange.

Yours sincerely,



Sir Jeremy Greenstock
Chairman, UNA-UK