

Speech by Prime Minister Robert Abela to members of the Diplomatic Corps

Excellencies,

It is my pleasure to welcome you here and thank you all for your continued and constructive engagement with Malta and my Government during the past year.

The year we are leaving behind has yet again proven to be a challenging one. Despite these challenges, we have put our best foot forward and continued to work to safeguard our citizens and businesses.

At a time when our collective security system is under duress, the need to work together to uphold the global rules-based order is even more fundamental for the pursuit of peace and security. During Malta's first year as an elected member on the Security Council, we have actively contributed to a constructive international dialogue.

The Mediterranean has always been at the centre of Malta's foreign policy. Malta was the first to advocate that there can be no peace in Europe without stability in the Mediterranean – a principle that has never been more relevant for the current predicament.

With regards to the Middle East question we wholeheartedly condemn the barbaric actions by Hamas on 7 October; and recall Israel's right to defend itself within international law; and fully support the humanitarian plight of Palestinians.

I therefore continue to reiterate Malta's call for a ceasefire and a return to the negotiation table to reach a lasting peace as outlined in the Maltese-led UNSC Resolution 2712. We reiterate the importance of all parties collaborating with regional and global partners to foster a genuine political pathway that supports a Two-State Solution.

We are heading into the third year of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Together with our European partners, we continue to condemn Russia's illegal, unjustified and unprovoked war and call for the unconditional end of Russia's aggression.

Malta has consistently supported Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders as well as its inherent right of self-defence. This has been further evidenced by Malta's efforts to host the third meeting of Political and Security Advisers to the Peace Formula Meeting. We now look forward to the upcoming discussions at the meeting in January in Switzerland.

Closer to home, Malta has maintained active involvement and engagement with all Southern Neighbourhood countries. Whilst there have been positive developments in our bilateral relations, we maintain ongoing concern about the situation in Libya and continue to urge all sides to reach consensus on the constitutional and electoral framework, facilitating the path toward free, inclusive, and fair elections.

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There have been regular and high-level interactions with the Gulf States, fostering increased investment and we are committed to maintaining an innovative approach that aligns with current challenges and opportunities, with the overarching goal of preserving Malta as an attractive and reliable partner for the Gulf.

Africa remains a vital strategic partner, a stance reflected in Malta's commitment to nurturing bilateral relations, fostering economic collaboration, and promoting regional stability, as highlighted through Malta's Africa Strategy. Since its launch, Malta has seen a significant increase in bilateral trade, investment, and market integration with African countries, enhancing business ties and institutional partnerships in tourism, education, health, services, energy and logistics.

To further continue this relationship and foster deeper global integration and collaboration, Malta strongly supported the inclusion of the African Union in the G20.

Further afield, Malta also recognises the importance of the Asia-Oceania region to global affairs. This is why Malta has maintained its engagement in EU-Indo Pacific relations over the past year and will continue to do so. Malta's engagement in Asia, has not been limited to the EU's regional strategy: it has also gone from strength to strength through bilateral dialogue with key regional players including India, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Our transatlantic relations also remain strong. Of particular significance, I wish to recall Malta's role in bringing together the USA National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, and Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, in Malta in September, as part of ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication between two crucial global players.

As a reiteration of Malta's commitment to intensify the excellent relations between Malta and Canada, the Government of Malta has also decided to open a High Commission in Ottawa. This will not only assist our extensive diaspora in the country, but most importantly aim to strengthen even further our bilateral political, trade and cultural relations.

Malta also remains staunchly committed on its path to implement its objective to strengthen relations with South American countries and further develop political, economic and cultural opportunities with partner countries in the region. This ambition is also aligned with the EU's constant efforts to deepen its overall engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean.

The United Kingdom also continues to remain an important partner of Malta and I am pleased to note that last year we concluded in Malta the Bilateral Cooperation Framework. The continued implementation of identified actions under this Framework is an important target for 2024. Further to relations between the EU and the United Kingdom, we welcome the political agreement on the Windsor Framework aimed at addressing practical challenges in the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

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In today's world marked by increasing unilateralism and great-power rivalry, multilateralism remains the most effective means to govern global relations in a way that benefits all. The world we live in, faces a number of geopolitical challenges which are often interwoven. We need to continue to work together to settle disputes and to achieve common goals and ease human suffering – all of which require global solutions.

Despite our size we have always striven to play our part and it is with pride to note that as an elected member on the UN Security Council, Malta has not been content to just being around the table. We have sought to actively contribute to a constructive dialogue and sought ways and means to alleviate the challenges that we constantly keep facing.

In 2023 we also celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Two of our main priorities during our UNSC membership will continue to be the advancement of the Women, Peace and Security.

Testament to our ongoing commitment towards multilateralism, Malta has taken on the Chairpersonship of the OSCE for the first time in our history, having received unanimous support from all the OSCE participating States at the end of last year. It is an honour and a privilege for my country to take on the driving seat in promoting the adherence of the values and principles that the OSCE stands for.

We also continue to engage on a multitude of thematic issues that are affecting us all. We continue to engage with partners bilaterally and in several multilateral fora to address migration holistically, in support of safe, orderly, and regular migration.

Our action on climate diplomacy has also focused mainly on the climate-oceans security nexus – in particular the challenges of sea level rise – and on the establishment of a comprehensive climate vulnerability and resilience index. Malta has also actively pursued initiatives of promoting and contributing to the interests and sustainable development of small island states and small island developing states. Malta is committed to use its official development assistance tools to continue to provide development aid to countries in need and facilitate implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The supply chain crisis in the past couple of years has underscored the ease with which global supply chains could be disrupted. The resulting realignment poses risks and opportunities alike for small, export-oriented economies, such as Malta, and for developing economies. We intend to do our part to ensure that these risks and opportunities are addressed in a fair and equitable manner, and with the deepening of international cooperation in sight.

Excellencies,

This year marks the 20th anniversary of Malta's accession to the EU, and our priority will be to ensure that our citizens and businesses are well-served in a strong and fair European Union that provides everyone the same opportunities to prosper. Our efforts should

continue to intensify against the background of the new impetus for the enlargement of the Union. Malta remains steadfast in its commitment towards a merit-based approach which will serve as a credible and transformative process for our partners.

A myriad of challenges and opportunities lie ahead of us, and this year will be a key moment of reflection on our European identity. This year will also be marked by the European elections which will kickstart a new legislative cycle, a chance to seize the opportunities we have ahead of us as a continent, as we focus on our priorities of developing a greener, more digital, and a more social Union.

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2024 should be a year where humanity prevails above all, and we recognise that peace and stability can only be guaranteed through continuous dialogue and engagement.

Let us remember that the future is not a distant reality, but a cause that we are all a part of. It is a canvas that we paint with our actions today. As representatives of our people, we have the responsibility to get the future right.

2024 is also a landmark year for our country, celebrating significant milestones which have forged our nation-state: 60 years since

Independence; 50 years of Malta as a Republic; 45 years since the decommissioning of the British Military facilities; and 20 years since Malta's accession into the European Union. Let us strive to leave a legacy that future generations will look back on with pride.

The road ahead may be challenging, but with unity, resilience, and a shared vision, there is no obstacle we cannot overcome.

Wishing you and your governments a happy, peaceful and prosperous New Year.

Thank you very much.