Perspectives for a World Free from Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament

“International Diplomacy and International Security Issues”

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, I would like to thank His Holiness Pope Francis and the Holy See for hosting this conference. Today’s event further illustrates your commitment to a world free from nuclear weapons and continued efforts to achieve it. The Holy See was one of the very first to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It has been a consistent moral voice for our shared goal to rid the world of these devastating weapons.

I would like to recall Pope Francis’ words to the General Assembly in 2015, “An ethics and a law based on the threat of mutual destruction – and possibly the destruction of all mankind – are self-contradictory and an affront to the entire framework of the United Nations.”

I have been given a very broad topic “International Diplomacy and International Security Issues” to reflect on today. In my humble attempt to speak to this subject, I would obviously like to try to drill down and focus on the role of the disarmament and non-proliferation regime as a diplomatic pillar that reinforces international peace and security, given my position as UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

Disarmament in history

But before that, let me put this into a historical context by briefly touching on centuries- or in fact millennia-long efforts in human history to regulate the conducts of individuals, groups and States in war. These efforts date back to the time of the Old Testament or Hindu Mahabharata, and continue throughout the human history.

More recently, since the mid-19th Century, the international community has sought to progressively develop the law of armed conflict in parallel with rules to prohibit or restrict specific weapons that cannot be used in conformity with humanitarian principles.
Some of the earliest international disarmament agreements established universal norms against weapons that cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering, or whose use would be repugnant to the conscience of humankind. These included prohibitions in 1899 on bullets that expand or flatten in the human body, in 1907 on poison and poisoned weapons, and in 1925 on asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases and bacteriological methods of warfare.

The role of disarmament as an essential element of contemporary international peace and security stems largely from the terrible human consequences that resulted from two world wars, including the first and thankfully only uses of nuclear weapons in conflict at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Since the end of the Second World War, this humanitarian imperative has also been clearly linked to the broader mechanism for peace and security. The adoption of the United Nations Charter saw a clear evolution in the international security architecture: use of force by a member-State is only allowed for self-defence and under the collective security arrangement defined in the Chapter 7 of the UN Charter – an agreement which, admittedly, has not been fully implemented. Disarmament is part and parcel of this international peace and security architecture.

Put simply, the purpose of disarmament is to prevent and end wars, and save lives – to ensure both State and human security, security for all.

This is why disarmament was a founding principle of the United Nations. It is reflected in both the Charter, which calls for “the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources” and for a system to regulate armaments, and the very first General Assembly resolution, which sought to eliminate “atomic weapons and all other weapons adaptable to mass destruction”.

Unfortunately, despite this historical underpinning, recognition of the importance of disarmament to the prevention, mitigation and resolution of conflicts has somehow diminished in recent years.
As we see international tension continue to rise, I would like to appeal to all of you to help reaffirm disarmament as a core part of our international agenda, and underscore our common goal of creating a more peaceful and prosperous planet, safer and more secure for all.

Disarmament in the 21st Century

Secretary-General Guterres has described today’s geopolitical context as a complex, interconnected web of new and old conflicts. These conflicts have precipitated gross violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and forced millions of people from their homes. It is a world of heightened international tensions and inflamed regional conflicts.

In such a fractious and uncertain world there are many voices that contend the time is not ripe for disarmament and that weapons provide security. There is an insinuation that disarmament is a utopian dream.

I believe that quite the opposite is true. In a fractious and uncertain world, more than ever we need disarmament as a diplomatic key to unlock the door to peaceful solutions.

In fact, we have historical evidence to this effect: The Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty came into force only a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, followed by Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty only a several years later – both at the height of the Cold War.

Our work is based on a strong recognition that peace and security does not depend on the dangerous and destabilising accumulation of arms, but on a commitment to shared norms, dialogue, transparency and confidence in one another’s actions.

As the only existential weapon ever created, nuclear weapons must remain our priority and we must work tirelessly towards a world free of them. However, disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control of all types of weapons are core elements of both conflict prevention and conflict resolution – whether we are talking about small arms and light weapons, explosive weapons, heavy artillery or chemical weapons.

And the problem of weapons pervades every peace and security crisis across the world, from violent crime, to civil war, to terrorism, to inter-State conflict.
Three roles of disarmament in the maintenance of international security

Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to dig a little deeper and discuss three aspects of how disarmament can help maintain international security today: first, the role of disarmament and non-proliferation norms in international security; second, the fundamental role of disarmament and non-proliferation in diplomatic strategies to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflict; and third, a future outlook of international security and the role of disarmament and non-proliferation diplomacy.

Norms in international security

First, the role of norms. The disarmament and non-proliferation regime is a constellation of instruments designed to promote a plethora of norms. These norms are aimed at preventing or diminishing the impact of armed conflict or violence.

Today, such norms are vital. The threat of nuclear war is not an abstract one. Armed violence is on the rise, and complex and brutal civil wars continue to force civilians to flee. In many countries, attacks using improvised explosives now kill and injure civilians and combatants more than any other type of weapon. When explosive weapons were used in populated areas, civilians accounted for 92 per cent of casualties.

Much of this carnage is the result of the inappropriate use of weapons, inadequate regulations on arms transfers and poorly-implemented controls on military stockpiles that have led to the widespread availability and misuse of weapons. This includes a growing illicit arms trade that fuels civil wars, violent extremism and criminal violence. As was recognised in Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the illicit arms trade also prevents socio-economic development.

In recent years, the international community has sought to create the norms that will address these concerns. Two instruments are of particular relevance.
First, the Arms Trade Treaty, which entered into force in 2015, seeks to create a norm of vigilance in the global arms trade against, for example, the diversion of weapons to armed groups or the use of weapons for the perpetuation of gender-based violence.

Second, since the turn of the century, governments have agreed to improve national small arms laws, import and export controls, and stockpile management, and to engage in cooperation and assistance under the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (PoA). The PoA creates a strong norm against the diversion of weapons to the illicit arms trade.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As recognised by this conference, perhaps the most important norm that has been developed over the last seventy years is the norm against the use of nuclear weapons and the pursuit of their total elimination. This is a norm based on a shared understanding of the catastrophic – probably existential – consequences of a nuclear conflict.

A range of instruments underpins this norm, but the load-bearing wall is the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or the NPT. The NPT’s near universality, verifiable non-proliferation safeguards and binding commitments to disarmament mean that it has made an invaluable contribution to international peace and security, and the shared norm that is the goal of world free of nuclear weapons.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which opened for signature this past September, creates additional norms for subscribing States. It effectively places nuclear weapons on the same level as chemical and biological weapons, and further emphasises the terrible humanitarian consequences of the use of even one nuclear weapon.

However, for norms – even universally held ones – to be continually effective they must be actualised through full implementation of all commitments by as many States as possible. Without constant tending they can, and do, decay.
Despite the good progress made since the end of the Cold War in arsenal reductions, risk mitigation and the decreasing role of these weapons in national security doctrines, the threat of a nuclear conflict appears to be growing.

Almost every day we hear dangerous rhetoric about their utility and calls for enhanced roles in national security doctrines. Modernisation campaigns in every single nuclear-armed State are provoking a qualitative, if not quantitative, arms race. The historic arms control treaties of the 1980s and 1990s are being eroded by claims and counter-claims of non-compliance. Beyond the New Start Treaty there are no envisioned negotiations on strategic arsenal reductions.

The collective will for nuclear disarmament has devolved into an increasingly acrimonious debate.

In such an environment, it is critical to keep intact the norms contained in the NPT and the practical security benefits they provide. As we head towards the 2020 Review Conference, States parties must inject a sense of urgency into finding common ground and ensuring the continued vitality and centrality of the Treaty.

Key to this is remembering that nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are two sides of the same coin – they are mutually reinforcing. In this context, it should be understood that failure to achieve concrete progress in nuclear disarmament will undermine the NPT. There is an urgent need for practical measures for irreversible, verifiable and universal nuclear disarmament.

The need for actualisation and implementation of norms is true across the disarmament and non-proliferation spectrum. For example, one hundred and thirty States have signed up to the ATT, but only ninety-two have ratified so far. If the treaty is to be effective it needs universal buy in and application.

**Disarmament as prevention and resolution of conflict**

Ladies and gentlemen
My second point relates to the role of disarmament in conflict prevention and resolution.

I’ve already mentioned the Sustainable Development Goals, but it is worth highlighting that they underscore a long-understood concept – disarmament provides the breathing space to build confidence, engage in broader dialogue and to pursue socio-economic development.

Arms control provides an avenue for dialogue even – perhaps especially – during times of heightened tension. We should not forget that it was ground breaking treaties such as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe that laid the groundwork for a peaceful end to decades of Cold War.

More recently, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear issue has provided an example of how a tense international security issue can be resolved through direct engagement and a shared commitment to dialogue and cooperation in good faith. A sustained commitment by all participants to the agreement remains critical, not only for its continued viability, but for the efficacy of diplomatic solutions to questions of peace and security.

The current crisis in Northeast Asia is a clear example of how disarmament will play a central role in bringing about a negotiated solution.

The Secretary-General has stood firmly with the international community in condemning the nuclear weapon and ballistic missile activities of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

However, it is a crisis that can only be resolved by a political solution based on a comprehensive and sustainable settlement through diplomacy. Any such solution will have to involve the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes and the will of all parties to achieve sustainable peace.

As I have said before, only by finding solutions at the negotiating table can we prevent a potential humanitarian disaster.

Future outlook of international security
Ladies and gentlemen

The third and final role I want to highlight is how disarmament diplomacy can help prevent future international security crises. In his address to the General Assembly in September, Secretary-General Guterres said “technology will continue to be at the heart of shared progress” but also that the “dark side of innovation” is a threat we must confront, and one that has “moved from the frontier to the front door”.

Advances in technology are transforming the world in a way not seen since the industrial revolution. However, the same innovations transforming transportation, healthcare and manufacturing also have either military applications or can be re-purposed for malicious intent.

The potential use of these innovations for military or even malicious purposes could have significant implications for international peace and security.

Technological innovations with such potential implications include enabling technologies – such as machine learning or information and communications technologies; others are dual use, such as biotechnology and additive manufacturing; and there are specific weapons technologies, such as new types of long-range precision delivery vehicles and armed unmanned aerial vehicles.

Taken together, these innovations could increase the likelihood of armed conflict by lowering the threshold for conflict, reducing decision-making time and the window for escalation control, and increasingly placing civilians in harm’s way.

In the near-term, the security implications of this suite of technologies will have ramifications for international humanitarian and human rights law. The portability, availability and relative ease with which much civilian technology can be re-purposed for malicious ends, raise serious proliferation concerns, including for non-State actors.

There is much we do not know about the peace and security implications of emerging technology, especially its combined effect. But we need to start asking questions now about how we can mitigate potential risks in ways that do not stifle innovation or the equitable transfer of technology for peaceful purposes and sustainable development.
And we need to ask these questions of an increasingly diverse range of actors, including the private sector – the drivers of this technological renaissance.

Ladies and gentlemen

I have done my best to illustrate how disarmament, as a central pillar of international diplomacy, can help resolve security crises. The global climate is rife with discord and diplomatic solutions are needed more than ever. If we are to move forward together, we should heed Pope Francis’ exhortation that the common destiny of humanity “demands the pragmatic strengthening of dialogue and the building and consolidating of mechanisms of trust and cooperation.”

Thank you.