Remarks at the opening of the seventy-third session of the
First Committee of the General Assembly

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Mr. Chairman, Ambassador Ion Jinga,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the 73rd session of the First Committee. At the outset, I congratulate Ambassador Ion Jinga on his assumption of the Chair and I assure him of the fullest support of the Office for Disarmament Affairs.

I would also like to thank Ambassador Mohammad Hussein Ali Bahr Aluloom, Permanent Representative of Iraq, for his able chairmanship during the 72nd session of the First Committee.

Since this Committee last convened, issues relating to disarmament and international security have remained at the forefront of public consciousness. This has been driven foremost by concerns over weapons of mass destruction.

These concerns, and the dangers they reflect, have been greatly exacerbated by international tensions, which are at their worst state since the end of the Cold War; the lack of accountability for the use of chemical weapons; malicious acts using digital technologies; and major question marks that hang over landmark agreements for nuclear reductions and limitations.

Disputes over nuclear weapons, including both their proliferation and continued existence, have been among the top international security concerns that have dominated the attention of world leaders.

During the high-level segment of the General Assembly, no fewer than 80 States made reference to nuclear weapons. The Security Council held meetings on related topics at both the levels of Head of State and Ministers.

Not all of this attention has been negative. The majority of Member States continue to support the preservation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Bold and patient diplomacy has moved the situation on the Korean Peninsula back from the brink of crisis. The historic summit between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the United States was an important step toward complete and verifiable denuclearization, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions, and sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula.

The three inter-Korean Summits have led to the implementation of confidence-building measures that are easing tensions, reducing the risk of armed conflict and promoting reconciliation. The Secretary-General has welcomed these developments and called for the international community to support these ongoing endeavors.
While we are relieved to see this regional situation step back from a state of crisis, at the global level nuclear risks will remain unacceptably high for as long as nuclear weapons continue to exist. As an illustration of this risk, we are witnessing with alarm leading military powers in tension and disputes with each other on several issues, including over the use of weapons of mass destruction.

Above all, I believe this underscores the need to redouble our efforts to seek a common path to reduce nuclear risks, build confidence, and realize concrete progress leading toward the total elimination of nuclear weapons. The next major milestone on the calendar is the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. I hope all States can make use of this session and all other available forums to narrow their differences, so a successful outcome can be achieved in 2020.

It is encouraging that the Russian Federation and the United States are pursuing discussions on the possible extension of the New START Treaty. Such a step can provide important breathing space for more substantial strategic dialogue. However, it should not be a stopping point or reduce the urgency of pursuing concrete measures to reduce nuclear risks and accomplish meaningful progress toward the fulfillment of outstanding disarmament commitments. As the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has demonstrated, strong international support exists for a permanent end to the threat posed by nuclear arms.

With respect to other weapons of mass destruction, the use of any toxic chemical, including chlorine, as a weapon, is totally unacceptable by any party and under any circumstances. Anyone who uses chemical weapons must be identified and must be held to account. The Security Council holds the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. The adoption of the June decision by the Special Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention addressing the threat from chemical weapons use has not lessened the need for the Council to find a common approach to tackle this issue. The international community must work together to prevent the erosion of the norm against chemical weapons.

In the area of conventional arms, it is regrettable that as some countries increasingly seek security in weapons, the global arms trade continues to grow at near historic levels. Enormous arsenals are being accumulated, including in the most fragile and conflict-prone regions of the globe.

As armed conflict moves from open fields to urban centers it is civilians who are the victims of this massive accumulation of weapons, especially when explosive weapons are used in populated areas. Military forces and armed groups are acquiring ever more powerful weapons they cause untold casualties, destroy critical infrastructure and drive record numbers of people from their homes.

I welcome the consensus outcome achieved at the third review conference of the United Nations programme of action on small arms and light weapons. At the same time, I am cognizant of the fact that fire arms remain a leading cause of violent harm and an accelerant of many other forms of violence.
The Secretary-General specifically addressed the impacts of new technologies on warfare, in his remarks at the high-level segment of the General Assembly. He characterized these impacts as “a direct threat to our common responsibility to guarantee peace and security.” He also observed that “malicious acts in cyberspace … are polarizing communities and diminishing trust among States”.

He placed particular emphasis on the weaponization of artificial intelligence as a growing concern, and he went on to say {QUOTE}:

“The prospect of weapons that can select and attack a target on their own raises multiple alarms — and could trigger new arms races. Diminished oversight of weapons has implications for our efforts to contain threats, prevent escalation and adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law. Let’s call it as it is. The prospect of machines with the discretion and power to take human life is morally repugnant.”

{UNQUOTE}

He encouraged Member States “to use the United Nations as a platform to draw global attention to these crucial matters and nurture a digital future that is safe and beneficial for all.”

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Concerns over the impact of arms are never raised in a vacuum. The current debate on the relationship between stockpiles and security is taking in a deteriorated international environment and spiraling mistrust and rivalries. For instance, some continue to describe the poor state of the international security environment as a rationale for their continued reliance on nuclear weapons and other national military capabilities.

We should strive to avoid circular debate on what needs to be solved first – the concerns many share over the continued existence of nuclear weapons or the security conditions that have convinced some that they still need to rely heavily on them. I do not think anyone doubts that confidence- and trust-building are essential instruments in the disarmament tool box. Nor should there be any doubt that we can make simultaneous progress on the inseparable objectives of reducing arms and building a better international security environment.

In light of this situation and the challenges we face, it is encouraging to see many members of the international community rally around the objective of preserving the international rules-based system.

Indeed, many of the fundamental axioms that underpin our national and human security rest on the solid foundations of multilateral customs, norms, agreements, arrangements and institutions. These have brought real security benefits which we all enjoy and often take for granted, extending from the taboo against the use of weapons of mass destruction to the prohibition against making civilians the object of attack.
However, as some of the trends I have highlighted earlier illustrate, we need to constantly reinforce and build out this system to keep pace with new challenges and developments. And we can only expect to realize common security for all if we have fair and effective institutions, starting with the full and equal participation of women in all disarmament processes as a priority.

The need for stronger support to States to advance their efforts to reinforce the rules-based international system is the very reason why the Secretary-General decided this year to launch his agenda for disarmament.

I am pleased to announce that last week we launched the initial implementation plan for the disarmament agenda on the website of the Office for the Disarmament Affairs. This details the planned activities of entities across the United Nations system. It will be a dynamic document. As work progresses, we will update it regularly, and new steps and activities will be added.

We are grateful for the expressions of support we have received and commitments some governments have made to champion specific actions. These champions have committed to financially support, or politically support in a leadership capacity, activities in connection with the agenda. Our intention is to publicly identify those States and regional organizations on the website for the implementation plan.

I look forward to having an opportunity later in this session to engage with the Committee in what I hope will be an interactive discussion on the implementation of the Secretary-General’s initiative.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In his remarks to the general debate of the General Assembly, the Secretary-General said, “In the face of massive, existential threats to people and planet -- but equally at a time of compelling opportunities for shared prosperity -- there is no way forward but collective, common-sense action for the common good.” Through the Secretary-General’s disarmament initiative, entities in the United Nations system and beyond are committed to working with you to make full use of this session to find common solutions.

I appeal to all of you to also heed the words of the Secretary-General, to rise above conference room politics and to keep your sights set on advancing the common good, in a spirit of compromise and cooperation.

Thank you.