Ensuring a Safer and more Secure World: 
A New Vision for Arms Control

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Thank you very much Mary [Whelan] for that exceedingly kind introduction.

I was very much looking forward to this opportunity to visit Dublin. It’s not the first time, actually, I’ve been here before when I was working for peacekeeping and it’s a real pleasure for me to come to this country which is one of the strongest supporters of multilateralism and in particular the field of disarmament.

What I’m going to do today is to briefly touch on the Secretary General’s agenda for disarmament, launched in May of last year, which is composed of four pillars: disarmament to save humanity, which is about the elimination of weapons of mass destruction; disarmament that saves lives, which refers to the humanitarian consequences of largely conventional weapons; disarmament for future generations, which is about mitigating the impact of new science and technology on international peace and security; and, a partnership for disarmament, this is about reinforcing to the general public the understanding of disarmament as part of their own agenda. We need new partnerships, for women to become more represented in the discussions and for the youth to also take these issues as their own. So, this is broadly the Secretary-General’s agenda for disarmament and Ireland, again, has step forward very forcibly to become a strong supporter of a couple of action points.

We are in a difficult situation at the moment when it comes to international peace and security, so I would like to take one element of the disarmament agenda and focus on the most acute areas mainly related to nuclear disarmament. There is a sense that perhaps a new vision is required in order for us to move forward closer to the total elimination of nuclear weapons. What does strategic stability look like in today’s world? That has really changed in the past couple of years. I wanted to talk about a new vision for arms control, with a question mark. This is a beginning of a discussion as I’m starting to hear from many experts and political figures, especially in this part of the world, Europe, that perhaps there is a new vision that is required. I would like to focus on this particular element of the Secretary-General’s disarmament agenda and I can’t think of a better country than Ireland to talk about this.

As you now, Ireland is historically one of the strongest supporters of disarmament and that dedication ranges from the eponymous “Irish Resolution” in 1961, which led to the creation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), to its strong advocacy for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was adopted at the United Nations in 2017. By joining forces with other middle power States, Ireland has spearheaded
prohibitions on landmines and cluster munitions and as a member of the New Agenda Coalition, it has helped achieve success through bridge-building between sharply divided positions in the NPT Review Conferences.

I, for one, have been particularly impressed by Ireland’s leadership in the drive to bring about gender equality in international security diplomacy. It has continued to shine a spotlight on an issue that, sadly, still requires such forthright champions.

My intention today is to speak about how we can all emulate the Irish in seeking a safer and more secure world, one that is free of the shadow of nuclear weapons.

A safer and secure world is, after all, the very purpose of the United Nations. As the UN Charter so boldly decrees, UN Member States are determined to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.

The United Nations strives to play a role in efforts to achieve this goal by: seeking the abolition of weapons of mass destruction; facilitating the strict regulation of conventional arms in accordance with the principles of the Charter; and ensuring that innovations in science and technology are not used in ways that contravene international law, including humanitarian and human rights law.

Unfortunately, the task of creating a safer and more secure world is one that is increasingly difficult. Throughout the nearly seventy-five years of the UN’s history, the world has experienced worrying periods of instability and turbulence. I believe that now, due to a variety of factors that I will outline, we are on the precipice of an especially dangerous era.

It is an era in which the potential use of nuclear weapons, either intentionally, through accident or miscalculation, is higher than it has been since the darkest days of the Cold War.

The web of agreements, instruments and arrangements that make up the disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control regime is being eroded and brakes on armed conflict removed. As Secretary-General Guterres said to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva earlier this year, “key components are collapsing” and there is potential for contagion across the entire regime.

Yet while the current regime is under threat, there is not, as yet, anything to replace it. The prospect of world without control over nuclear weapons is a potentially catastrophic one. For
the first time since the 1970s, we could be facing a world without any constraints on those States that possess nuclear weapons.

Addressing this dire situation should be a global priority. But a solution will not be found in adhering to a “business as usual” approach.

To paraphrase the Secretary-General, what is needed is a new vision for disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control, one that is capable of tackling the challenges of our time.

And the challenges we face today are a result of multiple interlinked factors. Let me mention them.

First, the international security environment is now characterized by an absence of trust, the militarization of international affairs and a dearth of dialogue. Relations between so-called ‘great powers’, including those that are nuclear-armed, are deteriorating into openly hostile behavior.

Unprecedented defense spending, blurred lines between conventional and strategic forces, and the proliferation of advanced weapons systems are increasing the risks of armed conflict.

The rules-based international order is being challenged by the failure to implement existing obligations and the abrogation of others.

Finally, the concept of strategic stability – essentially defined as mutual vulnerability during the Cold War and its aftermath – is being undermined in favor of efforts to secure lasting strategic dominance.

Second, the global nuclear order is now multipolar. Nuclear dyads and even triads are dangerously linked to regional crises and could drag in other nuclear-armed States.

After decades of efforts to reduce the numbers, risks and salience of nuclear weapons, progress has stalled and may even be going backwards.

Instead of the Cold War’s quantitative arms race based on numbers, we now face a qualitative one based on weapons that are faster, stealthier and more accurate.

And the development of new nuclear capabilities is coupled with dangerous rhetoric promoting the false assumption that a nuclear war can be controlled or even won.
Third, the world is in the midst of a technological revolution. Developments in information and communications technologies, artificial intelligence, sensors, robotics and computing power are rapidly transforming every aspect of our daily lives.

However, those same innovations also have the potential to radically alter conventional arms balances, increase prospects of armed conflict, and undermine nuclear stability.

For example, network enabled warfare opens up the possibility that command and control systems could be hacked, including by third parties with malicious intent. Data analysis coupled with advanced sensor arrays or uncrewed swarms could expose previously hidden second-strike capabilities, possibly creating ‘use it or lose’ mentalities regarding those capabilities.

Existing concerns about attribution for cyber-attacks and offensive cyber capabilities, and what constitutes an appropriate response, would become even more complicated with the addition of nuclear consequences.

An AI produced so-called ‘deep fake’ in the nuclear context – that is, the potential to fool command and control structures or early warning systems – could be catastrophic.

The development of weapons systems such as those that can maneuver at hypersonic speeds, designed to evade defensive systems, will further increase anxieties about vulnerability, prompting responses in kind.

These new technologies could incite the type of destabilizing arms racing that characterized the Cold War, meanwhile the current lack of transparency encourages States to pursue risky applications simply to keep up with Joneses.

Taken together, these overlapping factors have created a combustible international situation that increasingly threatens our collective security.

In such an environment, the need for a new approach is clear. The question is what will it look like? This is a big question that is starting to be asked, and we know it will take some time to articulate. I would like to suggest five elements to consider for a new approach, but before that, I would like to touch on three things that should guide our thinking process.

To begin with, it must acknowledge the lessons of the past and the great gains made in preventing nuclear war. These gains were hard won and, in many cases, remain valuable
pillars of international security. Let us not throw them away while we consider a new approach.

For example, and to flip Shakespeare, I come not to bury the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, but to praise it. Extending that treaty to all States that possess intermediate range missiles is something that should be explored, but it should not come at the expense of existing benefits, especially given the two most relevant parties hold some 90% of the global nuclear arsenal.

In the same vein, all efforts should be exerted to extend New START, which maintains not only caps on the world’s most dangerous weapons, but also the strict verification measures that help provide the basis for confidence in compliance.

In his agenda for disarmament, *Securing Our Common Future*, the Secretary-General highlighted some of the unfulfilled building blocks for a world free of nuclear weapons that could help both advance that goal and strengthen global security.

The entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the negotiation of a treaty prohibiting the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons are two long overdue instruments in danger of being thrown in the “too hard” basket. The opposite is required: we must redouble our efforts to achieve these goals.

I also do not believe the bilateral arms control process between the United States and the Russian Federation has run out of runway. With some ninety percent of the worlds stockpile between them, there remains a need for further reductions in strategic weapons by the two largest possessors. I know it is possible, because I have heard military experts from these countries say it is possible with political will.

Beyond these instruments, any regime must be based in the fundamental principles developed during the nuclear age, namely the norm of non-use of nuclear weapons and the understanding that the only way to eliminate the threat posed by nuclear weapons is to eliminate nuclear weapons themselves.

In other words, a world free of nuclear weapons is the goal we must continue to exert all efforts to achieve. This is my second key principle in search for a new approach.
Striving to preserve the gains of the existing order is important but failing to recognize that new challenges and dynamics require new thinking would be the diplomatic equivalent of sticking our heads in the sand.

Third, in light of the changed environment, perhaps a first step could be to develop a common understanding of the new risks we face and how they interact with existing concerns. Risk reduction is a broad term and it means different things in different contexts, especially regional contexts.

Similarly, a better understanding of, and agreement on, the potential consequences of technological developments, including the unintended consequences, could help States agree on ways to minimize challenges in this area while maximizing the benefits of science and technology.

Obviously, there are many questions about what is needed. There is also no one panacea to all our problems and, therefore, no reason why multiple initiatives cannot move forward in parallel.

With those said, there are five issues that I believe States should take into account when considering an appropriate framework and a new approach to arms control and disarmament in the current context.

First, because several nuclear-armed States continue to grow their arsenals and as nuclear-capable delivery systems become not only more dangerous but also more numerous and more available, a solely bilateral arms control process will not be sustainable for much longer.

All States that possess nuclear weapons should be engaged in a dialogue on first how to reduce nuclear dangers and second to develop the immediate steps that will get us back on a common path to a world free of nuclear weapons.

Numbers will continue to be important but might not be the only factor. The concept of what constitutes a strategic weapon might need to be reconsidered. As has been noted, in some nuclear equations intermediate range missiles are strategic.

Questions that we should be asking ourselves include: are regional specific arrangements appropriate? Can caps on the deployment of specific delivery vehicles be instituted? Can those weapons traditionally considered “non-strategic” be brought into broader arms control agreements?
This non-strategic issue is important for two reasons: First, because regional nuclear crises show how dangerous these weapons can be when it comes to issues such as escalation; and second, because there are currently no constraints on their development.

My second point about a possible new vision for arms control relates to the new challenges posed by a qualitative arms race. It is possible to limit numbers but constraining the quality of weapons is more difficult. Yet reducing and eliminating the risks posed by especially destabilizing categories of weapons is a critical step in taking the world back from the brink of armed conflict.

Take, for example, the deployment of so-called hypersonic weapons. I do not believe that the genie is out of the bottle yet on these inherently dangerous weapons. If an outright ban is not feasible at this stage, possible options should include a test ban or mechanisms for increasing transparency around their deployment to avoid ambiguity about their purpose – that is, whether they are carrying conventional or nuclear payloads.

Third, the international community should consider how to shore up any new regime against the potential vulnerabilities exposed by advances in technology.

I fully support existing processes aimed at further developing normative frameworks to secure and stabilize cyber space and to ensure that AI is used in ways that are consistent with international law and does not increase the possibility of armed conflict.

However, to date, existing processes have not yet addressed concerns about how technological innovations can potentially increase the chances of a nuclear detonation.

States should examine what transparency and confidence-building measures, or political initiatives, can be developed to avoid this terrible outcome. These could include more transparency about offensive cyber capabilities and politically binding – at least at this stage – instruments prohibiting interference with nuclear command and control structures or early warning systems.

The fourth issue any future regime will need to address is ballistic missile defense. No development in arms control has upended strategic stability in the way BMD has. It seems that despite the nascent capabilities in this sphere, fears about future deployments run deep.
Key questions include whether it is possible to introduce enough transparency to counter that fear or whether an offensive-defensive balance can be included in future arms control agreements.

My fifth and final issue that a future regime should consider is the problem of blurred lines between strategic and conventional capabilities, including through the proliferation of missiles and the myriad potential ways in which recent technological developments will affect future capability.

During the Cold War, nuclear weapons were effectively quarantined from all other weapons. Is this possible anymore? Do future arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation agreements that involve nuclear weapons also have to consider conventional capabilities, let alone emerging capabilities in nascent domains such as space and cyber.

Could we, for example, look at packages of measures – legally binding instruments, mixed with political commitments and confidence-building measures?

Regardless of how a new vision is elaborated, two elements will be essential for the success of any regime: Trust and compliance.

The two go hand in hand but the latter feeds the former and needs to be both verified and enforced.

Verification of nuclear disarmament is a priority for many States and there are multiple initiatives making progress on this issue. They are endeavors we should all support.

I’ve spent some time talking about the potential dangers posed by technology, but I also want to stress that the technological revolution can assist us in seeking a safer and more secure world. We should engage with the creators of these innovations to seek their help in finding those solutions. How, for example, can we use AI for verification? How can we verify software as well as hardware?

Trust will not be built through verification alone. It requires real dialogue and it requires rebuilding habits of cooperation.

Strategic dialogue that considers the effects of developments in domains such as space and cyber should be a priority. We need to understand the enormous impact of these domains on
strategic stability. Technical discussions are useful, but we also need dialogue at a more strategic level.

A new regime will also need new and different voices. I’ve already mentioned the need to engage with industry, but a new generation of arms controllers and disarmers must be nurtured to meet the challenges of the 21st century, including through understanding the lessons of the past. As Secretary-General Guterres is fond of saying: These are the future peacemakers.

Finally, any new vision needs to foster a return to the understanding that disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control are not ends in themselves – they are key measures to create a safer and more secure world. They are essential conflict prevention, reduction and resolution mechanisms that should be intrinsic to any peacemaking and peacebuilding processes.

I’ve asked more questions than given answers today, but I hope that I have, at least, provided some food for thought and a call to action. We cannot afford delay. The stakes are too high for us and for our children.

Thank you.