Keynote address at UNIDIR 2019 Innovations Dialogue

Digital Technologies and International Security

Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset please accept my apologies for not being with you in person. I am very disappointed not to be in Geneva to experience what have no doubt been interesting, insightful and provocative discussions.

As participants, I hope you have made the most of the extraordinary range of expertise gathered in one space and used the occasion to ask the many questions that need to be asked.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank the governments of Germany, India, Qatar and Switzerland, without whom this important event could not have taken place.

This particular Innovations Dialogue was mandated by a General Assembly resolution on the role of science and technology in the context of international security and disarmament. It is a testament to the seriousness with which many United Nations Member States are now approaching the peace and security implications of recent developments in science and technology.

As you know, the Secretary-General has also made it a priority to address possible challenges emerging from the military applications for, or weaponization of, developments in science and technology. In his agenda for disarmament, *Securing Our Common Future*, launched in Geneva last May, he identified “Disarmament for Future Generations” as one of three core pillars, in addition to those related to conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

In his agenda, the Secretary-General stressed that technological and scientific breakthroughs are revolutionizing many aspects of social and economic life and will accelerate the achievement of collective goals such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, he also expressed concern that many developments are also enabling, at a rapid pace, the design and acquisition of new weapon technologies with unclear or potentially dangerous applications, including for international peace and security.
Challenges include those to legal frameworks, non-proliferation regimes, global and regional stability, protection of civilians, as well as ethical and moral concerns about the implications of potential weapons systems.

Taken together, many of these technologies have the potential to reshape how armed conflict is waged, with still largely unclear ramifications.

Arms control has always been motivated by the need to keep ahead of the challenges to peace and security raised by developments in science and technology. But in today’s environment with its ever-accelerating pace of change, diffusion of technology and parallel game-changing developments, there is a growing perception that our normative and regulatory frameworks cannot keep up. Or perhaps, more to the point, that the emerging challenges do not fit neatly into our existing frameworks.

This is, of course, not to say that Member States are not working hard to grapple with these issues. In addition to the General Assembly resolution I mentioned, there are intergovernmental processes on the peace and security ramifications of information and communication technologies, lethal autonomous weapons systems and preventing an arms race in outer space. And we have 1.5 track dialogues on armed uncrewed aerial vehicles and so-called “hypersonic weapons”.

But we are still very much in a nascent phase in terms of governance. We are still trying to work out what our role is, how the instruments at our disposal can be adapted to deal with new problems, and what – if any – new structures might be necessary. We are also trying to gain a proper understanding of how these new issues will affect the already tremendous challenges we face related to the elimination, non-proliferation and control of conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

And we are still establishing the ground rules for engaging in a much broader way with different stakeholders in the conversations, including industry and the research community.

In his disarmament agenda, the Secretary-General sought to respond to some of these concerns by, inter alia, calling for increased awareness of the implications of scientific and
technological developments, and convening dialogue among the diverse stakeholders involved.

But we are dealing a broad agenda, one that goes beyond existing subject matters and processes.

Today’s event is impressive for three particular reasons.

First, is the subject matter this dialogue is addressing. Issues related to quantum computing, distributed ledger technology and the internet of things are only being discussed in our forums tangentially, if at all.

I would encourage you, however, to think holistically about the implications of science and technology. Ours is an era of technological convergence – cyber developments interact with artificial intelligence and robotics and sensors. We cannot afford to silo ourselves into one issue or another, but rather need to think about the bigger picture.

Second, is the diverse array of participants, both from an interdisciplinary and a geographic perspective. The need for different voices cannot be understated – a plurality of views helps to create better thought through solutions. This is especially true when there is still so much speculation regarding the issues at hand.

It is my hope that by facilitating engagement between different groups of actors, we can come to common understandings about the risks and opportunities we are facing and find a collective way forward.

Having said that, we have to expect that there will be some translation problems along the way as different actors learn to communicate better with one another. We also have to understand that all stakeholders have responsibilities to ensure the beneficial use of science and technology, including through responsible innovation and dissemination of information.

We also should be aware that, due to the geostrategic conditions in which we find ourselves, we are experiencing a dire trust deficit between Member States. We should approach our
deliberations, conversations and dialogues in ways that enhance transparency and build confidence.

**Third**, is the focus on the positive applications of technology. In my role I spend so much time discussing what we call the “dark side” of technology that we often forget to be techno-positive and remember that science and technology have been great enablers of peace and security, including disarmament processes. We need to think harder and more creatively about how we can harness the power of technological change for our own purposes in areas such as verification, safeguards and curbing the illicit trade in weapons. We need to establish dedicated forums to achieve these ends.

When I encounter dialogues such as this, I am heartened that together we can mitigate the challenges and maximize the benefits of this truly game-changing era of technological and scientific innovation. On behalf of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, let me say how much I look forward to working with all of you.

Thank you.