Remarks to the Security Council on Threats to International Peace and Security/Missiles

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New York
22 August 2019
Madam President,

Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

I have been asked to brief the Council today on the issues of missiles. Missiles have constituted an acute concern for international peace, security and stability ever since the first V2 rockets were fired indiscriminately at cities in England during the Second World War.

Indeed, it was the movement of nuclear-capable missiles in the Caribbean that sparked the most serious crisis of the Cold War almost 57 years ago.

Since that time, the acquisition, proliferation, deployment and use of missiles have continued to play destabilizing and even escalatory roles in international relations, with concerning implications for crisis management, including between nuclear-armed States, and, in some instances, causing serious civilian harm.

Today, missiles add a dangerous and destabilizing element to regional flashpoints from Northeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. They directly contribute to renewed strategic arms competition and hamper the achievement of broader disarmament objectives.

For decades, the role of ballistic missiles as a means of delivering weapons of mass destruction has been a central concern for the nuclear disarmament process. For example, the preamble of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons states that its purpose is “to facilitate the elimination from national arsenals of nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery.” This is why they have been the focus of bilaterally agreed limitations and reductions of strategic arms for over four decades.

Yet today, more than 20 countries possess ballistic missiles with capabilities that exceed the threshold for “nuclear capable” as defined in the guidelines of the Missile Technology Control Regime. And nuclear-armed States are actively pursuing novel missile and missile defence capabilities with unclear and potentially negative consequences for international peace and security.
We have also seen increased use of ballistic missiles in armed conflict over recent decades, most notably their indiscriminate use against cities during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Following the subsequent discovery of the extent of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programme in the 1990s, the Security Council prohibited that country from producing, acquiring or stockpiling ballistic missiles with a range greater than 150 km. And Security Council resolution 1540 (2004) required all States to prevent the proliferation to non-state actors of not only weapons of mass destruction but also their means of delivery.

Moreover, conventionally-armed missiles today feature in the arsenals of many States and some non-State actors and have been used as area bombardment weapons, often aimed at cities. Advances in technology are enabling conventional missiles to become more accurate at longer ranges, thereby facilitating their increased development, transfer and use.

The development of weapons systems using missile technology that can maneuver at hypersonic speeds could further undermine security and spark a destabilizing arms race.

The launch of ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia by Houthis in Yemen has been particularly troublesome. And concerns regarding ballistic missiles remain unresolved in connection with resolution 2231 (2015), which endorsed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Terrestrial-based and air-launched missiles have been used to destroy satellites in Earth orbit, including three times over the last decade and the most recent occurring earlier this year.

Madam President,

The recent collapse of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty removed one of the few constraints on the development and deployment of a destabilizing and dangerous classes of missiles. As the Secretary-General rightly noted, this Treaty played an important role in reducing risk, building confidence and helping to bring the Cold War to an end.

The INF Treaty’s ending should not be the catalyst for renewed and unconstrained competition in missile development, acquisition and proliferation. I echo the Secretary-
General’s call for all States to avoid destabilizing developments and to urgently seek agreement on a new common path for international arms control.

It is important to note that despite these various alarming developments I have mentioned, there remains no universal norm, treaty or agreement regulating missiles. Today, only the Russian Federation and the United States are subject to legally binding restrictions on the numbers of certain missiles they may possess.

Measures such as the Missile Technology Control Regime and Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, while of clear value, are not sufficient to deal with every aspect of the threat missiles and their proliferation pose to international peace and security.

The three United Nations panels of experts on missiles that met in the 2000s provided useful syntheses of the various security issues related to missiles, as they attempted to deal with the matter in a comprehensive manner. However, the First Committee of the General Assembly has not adopted a resolution on the issue since 2008.

More and more countries, including those outside of existing multilateral arrangements, continue to acquire and develop their ballistic missile capabilities. The Security Council has been particularly actively seized of activities in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which is actively augmenting its missile capabilities, contrary to the Council’s resolutions.

Madam President,

As the Secretary-General made clear in his agenda for disarmament published last year, measures for arms control and disarmament, including in relation to missiles, played a crucial role in conflict prevention, risk mitigation, de-escalation and tension reduction at the height of the last Cold War.

Preventing the spread and emergence of destabilizing weapons remains a vital unfinished task for the international community in our shared endeavour to preserve international peace, security and stability. Moving forward, there is an urgent need for new international approaches – potentially including legally-binding multilateral approaches –
consensus and agreement in dealing with the various problematic aspects of missiles. Increased attention by the Security Council to these challenges can indeed give impetus to these efforts.

Thank you for this opportunity, Madam President.