



Remarks to the Conference on Disarmament

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United Nations**



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Mr. President, Ambassador Julio Herráiz,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Mr. Møller,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great privilege to address this body for the first time in my capacity as High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. Some of you I had the pleasure to meet already. I look forward to engaging with all of you in the months to come.

The closing of the annual session of the Conference on Disarmament is occurring at a particularly troubling time for the cause of disarmament. Less than ten days ago, the norm reflected in the last multilateral instrument negotiated by this body, namely the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, was violated for the sixth time this century.

The Secretary-General has strongly condemned the underground nuclear test by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on 3 September. This act was yet another serious breach of the DPRK's international obligations and undermines international non-proliferation and disarmament efforts. It was also profoundly destabilizing for regional security.

It is both notable and vital that the Security Council remains united on this matter as again confirmed last night at the adoption of resolution 2375. The Secretary-General has observed that this unity also creates an opportunity to engage diplomatically to decrease tensions, increase confidence and prevent escalation – all aimed at the previously agreed denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The Secretary-General will always stand for a peaceful solution of this situation and he remains ready to support efforts towards this end.

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is often at times of heightened international tension and conflict that some resort to a few common fallacies.

One such fallacy is centered on the argument that security can be found only through the strength of arms and not through the wisdom of cooperation. Yet, this perspective is not only deeply dangerous, it is also fundamentally ahistorical.

Measures for disarmament and arms control have played a crucial role in conflict prevention, risk mitigation and reduction, de-escalation and in reducing tensions. The Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty came into force in 1963, only a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons opened for signature in 1968. Judging from the history, it should never be the case that a poor international security situation obviates the pursuit of disarmament. Rather, growing tensions, simmering conflicts and the unchecked proliferation of destabilizing arms must compel us to act with new urgency.

Another common fallacy is that norms for disarmament and arms control only have value if they can be perfectly verified and perfectly complied with. Strangely, this argument is only used as justification not to pursue new measures.

This argument is also belied by how we value norms and measure their merits, which is on the basis of what they have accomplished, and not solely on the fact we might still need more work to ensure universal adherence.

That's why we consider the nuclear non-proliferation regime to be successful despite a few difficult cases, why the norm against nuclear tests remains strong despite the actions of one country, and why the taboo against chemical weapons continues to be effective despite violations by a State and non-state actors. And we must continue and redouble our collective efforts to uphold and further strengthen these norms.

Let me be clear. I see disarmament and arms control as the other side of the same coin called "security". The United Nations was created to maintain international peace and security, and was given the mandate for disarmament for that purpose.

There have been many attempts to diagnose the challenges faced by this body for more than two decades. As a relatively newcomer to this field, I can only offer some general observations from the perspective of my own experience.

First, all the norms I have described were conceived as partial measures and urgent stop gaps which is meant to lead us in imperfect circumstances towards our ultimate objective of peace and security with the least diversion of resources to arms.

Yet, many of these measures have come to represent stopping points, where the status quo can safely thrive – whether that is the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons, year-on-year growth in military expenditure or the deepening profit-driven global arms trade.

International circumstances have dramatically changed in recent decades, and yet this Conference remains stuck on only the initial stages of a step-by-step approach dating back to 1957 and General Assembly resolution 1148. Perhaps the time has come to seriously examine how well our immediate priorities, including the core items and Decalogue, remained aligned with an effective programme leading to our ultimate objective.

Second, the organs of the United Nations disarmament machinery do not seem to function as a key part of what should be an integrated system geared toward constructing and revitalizing the necessary components of the international peace and security architecture. There was a period when disarmament negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament were central to international peace and security discussions and indeed made critical contributions, as we can see from the Chemical Weapons Convention or the CTBT. This has not been the case for a long time.

Perhaps, by necessity, the General Assembly has recently had to take on many roles – initiating studies on new issues, convening expert groups to deliberate and elaborate measures on specific issues, and conducting negotiations on treaties in both the areas of conventional and nuclear weapons.

Of course, to the extent that these innovations are effective, I have no doubt that Member States will continue to make use of them. In fact, I continue to see room to explore opportunities for even greater dynamism in the working methods of the New York-based organs. For instance, an expanded establishment of working groups by the First Committee might better facilitate, in a more cost effective way, the type of mandates increasingly assigned to governmental expert groups.

Even the Disarmament Commission has recently been able to turn around its long-standing stalemate with the adoption of a substantive outcome earlier this year. It also held a very positive informal exchange on the proposal for a new item on implementation of transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities, for the purpose of preventing an arms race in outer space. The ability of the Commission to effectively carry forward work initiated in the First Committee would be yet another positive innovation in the methodology of the disarmament machinery.

But where are these trends leaving the Conference on Disarmament? I welcome the continued engagement by all delegations, which have continued to make proposals, participate in informal discussions and to seek common ground in the way ahead working group, so ably chaired by Ambassador Htin Lynn of Myanmar. I regret that the working group was unable to reach agreement on recommendations. Regardless of the ability of the CD to break its stalemate, it seems clear that the work of the United Nations in the field of disarmament will and must go on, through all prudent but effective pathways available.

So, after 21 years of stalemate, I put to you the question: do you wish to protect this part of the machine called the Conference on Disarmament, by finding ways to compromise and return to substantive work? Do you want to protect the decision-making process called “consensus”, which will by definition require a genuine spirit of compromise and a strong political will to make progress? Or do you wish to follow the current path of increasing innovation and the use of other types of mechanisms and processes to tackle priority disarmament issues? For any path you may choose, you will need to have a strong commitment to international cooperation, and a vision for strengthening multilateralism in today’s complex, multi-polar world.

Resolving this fundamental question has become an urgent matter. Even as we continue to debate how to achieve decades-old priorities, our peace and security architecture is struggling to keep up with the implications posed by emerging military capabilities and new technologies. Other parts of the UN machinery are currently stepping in to address many of what Secretary-General Guterres calls “frontier issues”, which include lethal autonomous weapon systems, cyberwarfare, developments in biotechnology and outer space activities. Yet, in light of the rate of technological development and innovation, we must judge the situation in the CD not only against its ability to overcome its present stalemate, but rather against its ability to respond to new challenges.

This brings me to my third and final point. Effective leadership seems more vital than ever in making consensus-based multilateralism work in a multi-polar world. We are well past the days where agreement between superpowers and the consent of the non-aligned was sufficient to conclude an international treaty.

Leadership in a multipolar world requires a more substantive effort, bigger ideas and vision, creativity and innovation, trust and confidence, and a stronger commitment. Effective and irreversible progress to our collective disarmament goals can only be made when those who possess, manufacture, use and transfer are engaged and are present at the table.

At the same time norms belong to the entire community and their creation can be initiated by anyone. The critical mass necessary to bring new norms into life can be built from coalitions of all sizes and natures. The movements towards some of our strongest disarmament norms, including those reflected in the NPT and the CTBT, were sparked by those without nuclear arms.

Following on from the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, we need new cooperation amongst states, building new coalitions, as well as new partnerships between states and civil society for disarmament. We must also collectively ensure that the new Treaty will not further divide the international community, but rather will create new momentum and motivations towards nuclear disarmament. This will require a new vision and new understanding of what benefits disarmament can bring, and a renewed engagement from the bottom-up and from the top-down.

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

In his message to the opening of your session this year, Secretary-General Guterres stressed that “Global tensions are rising and dangerous words spoken about the use of nuclear weapons”. Now at the end of your session, it is unfortunate that these words ring even more true today.

I hope that this sombre state of affairs will lend new urgency to your work and create the impetus needed for this body to resume its proper place at the vanguard of the United Nations’ disarmament machinery. After several weeks of particularly difficult times and divergent views within the Conference on Disarmament, I now sense that all of you here, regardless of what positions you might have held, are indeed coming to a clear “consensus” that something serious has to be done with this body. This is an important point of convergence – that you want to devote some serious work to bring the Conference on Disarmament back to where it should be. And you have the power to do so.

As a member of the UN Secretariat, I am a strong believer of the UN Secretary-General’s moral authority and thought-leadership. We are committed to further sharpen these roles of the Secretary-General in the disarmament field, in support of member states efforts. I look forward to our continued strong and close partnership in this regard.

Thank you very much.