



**Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu at the opening meeting of the 72nd session of the
First Committee of the General Assembly**

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Mr. Chairman, Ambassador Baher Al-Uloom,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great privilege to address the First Committee for the first time in my capacity as High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

At the outset, I wish to congratulate Ambassador Baher Al-Uloom on his election and commend his willingness to jump straight into such an important role so soon after arriving in New York. I wish to assure you of the full support from my Office.

I also wish to thank the President of the General Assembly for his participation at the opening of our session. His presence so early in the work of the Committee underscores the high expectations for Member States to take forward tangible and concrete actions to advance disarmament, peace and security.

The United Nations has sought a solution to the challenge of disarmament since its inception. Yet, there have been only rare occasions over the past 72 years where the need for decisive progress was more urgent.

This was highlighted by the fact that Secretary-General Guterres spoke first about the nuclear peril in his address to the general debate of the General Assembly just two weeks ago.

He said, “The use of nuclear weapons should be unthinkable. Even the threat of their use can never be condoned.”

“But today global anxieties about nuclear weapons are at the highest level since the end of the Cold War.”

The Secretary-General was of course referring to the increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The incendiary rhetoric and threats we have heard over the past several weeks has awakened – and justified – public anxiety over the threat to humanity posed by the continued existence of nuclear weapons.

People throughout the region and beyond, including in my home country, live again in fear, for the second time in human memory, that they may become victim of the use of nuclear weapons. Civil defense drills have once again become a sad necessity of daily life.

The Secretary-General has stood firmly with the international community in condemning the nuclear and ballistic missile activities by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Any resumption of armed hostilities would bring unimaginable humanitarian consequences. The only way to reach a comprehensive and sustainable settlement is through diplomacy and dialogue, and the solution can only be political.

The crisis in North East Asia must serve as a wakeup call. We continue to be haunted by the spectre of nuclear annihilation decades after the end of the Cold War. The failure to yet accomplish our long-standing aspirations for disarmament has left us today with unprecedented dangers. This failure also constitutes a great burden on the fulfilment of many interrelated objectives, from the achievement of sustainable development to the elimination of war as an instrument of foreign policy.

As we assess the current international situation and what we should do to advance the disarmament agenda, it is important to recognize three essential realities:

First, our norms have proven durable despite being challenged. The international community has remained unified in the face of violations of the taboos against the use of chemical weapons and nuclear testing.

This should give us hope in our ability to continue to create and enforce new norms in other areas where they are badly needed, especially in the area of conventional arms, the progressive codification of rules to protect civilians from armed conflict, and where these issues intersect with emerging military technologies.

Second, disarmament has played a historical role in preventing war and maintaining international security. This was the very reason for which the United Nations was created.

The path to peace through disarmament does not lie waiting for the right security situation to materialize, while countries increase their military budgets and stockpiles year after year. On the contrary, measures for disarmament can build trust, reduce tensions and create the space to establish more durable and sustainable security mechanisms. We should not shy away from bolder thinking in returning to arms control as a means for solving contemporary security crises.

Third, the completion of the disarmament agenda will enable the United Nations to carry forward so many of the UN's other priority objectives.

Efforts to control arms have been increasingly recognized as intersecting with achieving priorities in the fields of sustainable development, humanitarian principles, human rights, gender equality, and peace and security. Our ability to respond effectively to the current and emerging security challenges of this Century will require us to embrace each of these imperatives for disarmament.

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I will now provide some observations on what I see as the main challenges and opportunities facing this session of the First Committee.

First, in the area of weapons of mass destruction.

I have touched upon already one particular nuclear peril. But, we cannot lose sight of the fact that more than 15,000 nuclear weapons remain in the world, with many on high levels of alert. The adoption and opening for signature of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was a historic accomplishment. As those States that choose now to accept these additional norms consolidate this instrument, we must also make use of the current review cycle of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to seek collective means for implementing long outstanding commitments. There are many avenues to reach a world without nuclear weapons, but each of you must take responsibilities to redouble efforts and make concrete steps.

Our ability to achieve peace and security through disarmament and diplomacy depends on our commitment to fully carry out shared agreements. This is why it is essential for all participants to remain committed to the long-term viability and success of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear issue. I hope Members of the Committee add their voice in support of this historic agreement, as a demonstration of what can be achieved through direct engagement and a shared commitment to dialogue and cooperation in good faith.

On the matter of chemical weapons, we regrettably continue to find evidence of the use of toxic chemicals as weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, by both State and non-State actors. In order to uphold our shared norms of humanity, all those who have used these weapons must be held to account. These heinous acts cannot be allowed to weaken the force of our common principles. In this connection, I applaud the Russian Federation for completing the verified destruction of its chemical weapon stockpile. This milestone sends a very important signal at a time when the use of chemical weapons is, once again, back on the international agenda.

Second, Secretary-General Guterres has called for disarmament that saves lives. This means focusing on measures that mitigate the impact of armed conflict on civilians, enhance public safety and security, and prevent the outbreak of war in the first instance.

The devastating toll caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas has been well documented. This is why the effort to seek a political commitment is an important step, which should be brought to fruition. Expert-level discussions could also build on existing efforts and explore how to translate general principles into concrete measures.

In many countries, attacks using improvised explosives now kill and injure civilians and combatants more than any other type of weapon. Effectively dealing with this growing threat requires a comprehensive approach, at both the national level and across the United Nations system.

Eliminating the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons is essential for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The forthcoming review conference of the Programme of Action should be an opportunity to take stock of our progress toward this end, and in particular to assess if new measures are needed to address challenges posed by new technologies.

It is also encouraging to see new initiatives on dealing with the problems posed by the excessive accumulation of ammunition; as well as on increasing transparency, accountability and oversight on the transfer and use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles.

Finally, we need to keep ourselves ahead of the curve on the so-called frontier issues – which include emerging military capabilities with potentially dangerous and destabilizing implications.

This session faces a critical junction in its long deliberations on how to deal with the increasing malicious use of cyberspace. I hope we are able to find a common approach to build upon the outcomes achieved by the past expert groups in an inclusive setting.

Rapid advances in the civilian and military application of artificial intelligence should continue to give impetus for formal deliberations on lethal autonomous weapon systems within the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Diplomatic and political efforts to keep outer space as a realm of peace also continue to gain momentum. I look forward to addressing this issue in more depth at the joint panel discussion of the First and Fourth Committees, which will be held on Thursday next week.

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You will have noted that this Committee's agenda has never been more crowded. We may take this as a sign that our actions to date have not been quick enough or as decisive as they have needed to be. But we may also take it as a sign that at least this part of the disarmament machinery remains alive and robust. This latter possibility is evidenced by the large number of new initiatives Member States have proposed introducing this year. I therefore wish to encourage you to continue exploring means for increasing the dynamism in the First Committee's working methods, including by ensuring the equal of women in all processes.

In closing, I wish to recall the words of the Secretary-General, who said to the General Assembly last month:

“Today, proliferation is creating unimaginable danger, and disarmament is paralyzed. There is an urgent need to prevent proliferation, to promote disarmament and to preserve gains made in these directions. These goals are linked. Progress on one will generate progress on the other.”

I hope these words serve as a helpful guide to your work. The issues and challenges in front of us are indeed daunting. But I am also tremendously excited about the prospect of opportunities you have in front of you. I appeal to all of you to take advantage of the opportunities and wish you the best for a successful session.

Thank you very much.