

Confidence-Building Measures Supporting Arms Control Extremely Critical, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Meeting on Non-proliferation

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Secretary-General Statements and Messages

Following are UN Secretary-General António Guterres' remarks to the Security Council at the briefing on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in New York today:

I am pleased to join you for this timely debate, and I thank the Republic of Kazakhstan for convening it. Kazakhstan has a proud tradition of support for a world free of weapons of mass destruction, and for the global non-proliferation regime. I thank [Kazakhstan] President [Nursultan] Nazarbayev for his personal leadership on this vital issue. Kazakhstan's contributions include rejecting the possession of nuclear weapons and founding the International Day against Nuclear Tests.

This Council, too, is instrumental in preventing the spread and use of weapons of mass destruction. As the Council declared in 1992 at its first Heads of State [and Government]-level summit on the issue, the proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction constitutes a threat to international peace and security.

Confidence-building measures, such as [Security Council] resolutions 255 (1968) and 984 (1995), on negative security assurances helped pave the way respectively to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to its indefinite extension. However, despite the Council's efforts, the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction remains, and indeed, seems to be gathering force.

Global anxieties about nuclear weapons are the highest since the cold war. The situation on the Korean Peninsula is the most tense and dangerous peace and security challenge in the world today. I remain deeply concerned over the growing risk of military confrontation and the unimaginable consequences that would result.

I welcome the firm decisions the Security Council has taken in response to nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in defiance of Security Council resolutions. They must be fully implemented.

The Council's unity also creates the opportunity for diplomatic engagement. As I said to the General Assembly this week, I welcome the reopening of inter-Korean communication channels, especially military-to-military. This is critical to lower the risk of miscalculation or misunderstanding and to reduce tensions.

I am also encouraged by the decision of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to participate in the upcoming Winter Olympics in the Republic of Korea. We need to build on these small signs of hope, and expand diplomatic efforts to achieve the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in the context of regional security.

Elsewhere, trust on nuclear and other issues between the United States and the Russian Federation continues to ebb. Vital strategic arms-reduction measures established during and after the cold war are under threat. After the expiration of New START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] in 2021, there seems to be no appetite to negotiate new nuclear arms arsenal reduction treaties.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear programme is also being questioned. This multilateral agreement, which is in the interest of the Iranian people and the international community at large, should be preserved.

In the Syrian conflict, the use of chemical weapons seriously challenges the global taboo against these weapons of mass destruction. If the use of chemical weapons in Syria is once again determined, the international community needs to find an appropriate way to identify those responsible and hold them to account. Without such an avenue, we are allowing the use of chemical weapons to take place with impunity. I hope the Council can return to unity on this issue.

The threats posed by weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery are taking place in an environment of increasing military budgets and the over-accumulation of weapons. And they are coupled with a serious growth in regional tensions. In such a geopolitical context, confidence-building measures that support arms control, non-proliferation and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction are extremely important.

By increasing understanding of others' positions and allowing information-sharing on, for example, military budgets, strategic outlooks and troop movements, they can help to decrease tension and avert conflict. In the case of the Biological Weapons Convention, which does not have a formal verification mechanism, a system of confidence-building measures has contributed to enhancing transparency.

These measures are intended to "prevent or reduce the occurrence of ambiguities, doubts and suspicions" through the provision of annual information on national biodefence programmes, high containment laboratories, legislative frameworks and vaccine production. Unfortunately, participation has been less than satisfactory, with fewer than half of all States Parties regularly providing information.

For the measures to be truly effective, States must take full advantage of their benefits. Trust is essential. But, confidence can be undermined by bellicose rhetoric, confrontational approaches, the absence of communication channels, and inflexible positions.

Engaging in disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control measures are, in and of themselves, confidence-building. By removing the threat posed by weapons, arms control and non-proliferation mechanisms provide the breathing space for dialogue, boost confidence in parties' intentions and lay the groundwork for building the trust necessary to end conflicts.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the ground-breaking arms control agreements of the late 1980s and early 1990s that contributed to the peaceful end to the cold war. It is, therefore, alarming to see historic accords such as the Treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces and the Open Skies Treaty under question.

Effective verification mechanisms have proven to be some of the most successful and enduring types of confidence-building measures. From the ground-breaking verification protocols of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, to the invaluable work undertaken by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), verification builds confidence. In this context, I welcome the establishment of a group of governmental experts on nuclear disarmament verification.

Effective verification requires support for those entities tasked with monitoring and verification to ensure they can fulfil their duties in an impartial and professional manner. It also requires understanding that non-proliferation challenges are not static. The measures we use to overcome them need to evolve in tandem with the implementation of disarmament commitments.

I believe the United Nations can play a central role in assisting Member States to develop, augment and support confidence-building measures. The United Nations' position as an "honest broker" allows us to act as a venue in which all parties can engage in dialogue — whether for the development of new norms and values, or to resolve existing disputes and promote understanding.

Going forward, the Security Council, in particular, can provide leadership by demonstrating unity and continuing to highlight the importance of dialogue and diplomacy as an essential means for building confidence.

A measure that all Member States can undertake is the universal and complete implementation of all disarmament and non-proliferation obligations. I appreciate that, due to resource and other constraints, the implementation of disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation commitments can prove difficult for some Member States. I, therefore, call on all States able to do so to provide the necessary capacity-building assistance.

The development of practical confidence-building measures is an important means of achieving the United Nations mandate to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. However, they are not an end in themselves.

Preventing, mitigating and resolving conflict requires comprehensive political solutions that include dialogue and negotiation, and in cases involving weapons of mass destruction, verifiable disarmament and non-proliferation.

I believe the current international situation underscores the need to reframe and modernize long-standing disarmament and non-proliferation priorities. Deepening divisions and persistent stagnation in this field are exacerbating international tensions and creating new dangers.

As a contribution to reversing these trends, I intend to explore opportunities to generate new direction and impetus for the global disarmament agenda. I look forward to engaging with stakeholders on these issues in the months ahead.

Disarmament

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