Briefing at the Security Council Virtual Arria-formula meeting on “Cyber Stability, Conflict Prevention and Capacity Building”

Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
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His Excellency Mr. Jüri Ratas,
His Excellency Mr. Urmas Reinsalu,
His Excellency Mr. Sven Jürgenson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity today to provide a briefing on the issue “Cyber Stability, Conflict Prevention and Capacity Building”. I would like to particularly express my appreciation to Estonia for taking the initiative, under its Presidency of the Security Council, together with Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and Kenya, to organize an Arria-formula meeting on this timely and important topic, made even more so in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Please allow me to focus my briefing on the 3 following points today: First, the ICT threat landscape and the new dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic; second, the already existing nascent global normative framework for addressing these threats and the current processes in place to take the framework forward; and finally, I would like to take the opportunity to draw your attention to the challenges that I believe still lie ahead of us.

1. **ICT threat landscape and the COVID-19 dimension**

Digital technologies are transforming our world and our daily lives in all aspects. From personal devices to entire industrial control systems, connectivity presents tremendous opportunity for social connection and economic development.

However, our growing digital dependency also increases our vulnerability to ICT attacks. It is estimated that one such attack takes place every 39 seconds.1 The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that nearly 90 countries are still only at the early stages of making commitments to cybersecurity.2 It is concerning that we are not as yet collectively equipped to deal with the cyber threats at hand.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is now moving us towards increased technological innovation and online collaboration. Many would agree that digital connectivity will be key to our recovery in the post-COVID era.

However, associated cybercrime is also on the rise, with a 600% increase in malicious emails during the current crisis. There have also been worrying reports of attacks against healthcare organizations and medical research facilities worldwide.3

While the threat from the misuse of ICTs is urgent, the good news is that some progress has been made at the global level at United Nations to address these threats, which brings me to my second point: We have already made important progress in creating a nascent global normative framework for the use of ICTs by States.

2. Development and implementation of a global normative framework to address ICT threats

The issue of ICTs in international security has been on the agenda of the United Nations since the Russian Federation first introduced a draft resolution on the issue in 1998.

Many of you are already familiar with the work of the UN Group of Governmental Experts or “GGE” on the use of ICT, which has convened in five iterations since 2004. These Groups have reached success in agreeing that international law, in particular the UN Charter, applies to the use of ICTs. The Group also recommended practical confidence-building and capacity-building measures for fostering peace and stability in the digital sphere. And the 2015 Group was able to agree on 11 voluntary non-binding norms of responsible State behaviour in the use of ICTs.

The General Assembly adopted a resolution calling on all States to be guided in their use of ICTs by this 2015 GGE report.

Therefore, together, the elements of the GGE reports constitute what can be considered the start of a “nascent global normative framework” in the use of ICTs. It is, of course, important to stress that it is still being discussed and further developed by States, which brings me to my next point on current inter-governmental processes as well as the implementation of the global ICT framework.

Global processes

In 2018, two UN processes, an Open-ended Working Group or “OEWG” open to all Member States, and a Group of Governmental Experts comprising 25 experts working in their individual capacities, were established to take forward the issue of the use of ICTs and international security.

I am very heartened by the substantive and collaborative engagement of States so far at the OEWG, as well as their engagement with the GGE through informal consultations of the whole UN membership and regional consultations. The expectations are high as deliberations continue in the OEWG and GGE to take forward this important issue while preserving what has already been agreed.

Both Groups are in the process of continuing discussions on the framework: How international law applies in the use of ICTs; norms, rules and principles; confidence-building and capacity-building measures. The OEWG is also discussing whether regular institutional dialogue should be established to foster continued deliberation on ICTs in the context of international security.

It is clear that an increasing number of States are beginning to recognize the urgency of the issue of ICTs and international security and are committing themselves to action. Greater awareness, recognition and acceptance of the normative framework is growing globally.

In terms of how the normative framework is being taken forward, I believe it is also important to highlight the work done by many regional bodies whether in subscribing to the 11 voluntary, non-binding norms recommended in the 2015 GGE report or to take forward confidence and capacity building measures based on the GGE reports.
I am also encouraged by the continued engagement by private sector, non-governmental organizations and academia, not only on the framework of the ICTs in the context of international security, but also on the broader issue of digital cooperation including the Secretary-General’s High Level Panel report and its recommendations. I hope that these stakeholders will continue to join in the conversation – and take action – alongside States.

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While there are many encouraging efforts being undertaken, let me turn to some of the key challenges which I believe are still facing us.

3. **Challenges that still lie ahead in the development and implementation of the global framework**

Even though socialization to raise awareness of the global framework has taken place and there are laudable ongoing regional and multi-stakeholder initiatives, we are not yet at the place of a mature implementation of the global framework. At the same time, the framework continues to evolve and is being discussed and taken forward through the GGE and Open-ended Working Group.

There remains much work to be done through the inter-governmental processes and by all stakeholders to implement and take forward the work of promoting a stable and peaceful ICT environment. The roadmap for this must include efforts to cultivate truly inclusive partnerships, to promote common understandings on key issues and to improve our collective capacity-building efforts and methodology.

States should also be encouraged to share their experience in implementing their international commitments in practice which in turn can be helpful to other States.
We also need to focus our attention on better matching needs and resources in our efforts to build capacities globally so that these efforts are effective, sustainable and meet the priorities of countries.

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UN Secretary-General Guterres has said that we need to overcome the digital, social, and political divides in the digital space in order to achieve “one world, one net, one vision.” Allow me to conclude by encouraging all States to rise up to the challenge to work together to address global digital challenges, building on the good work already being done. I also encourage States to commit fully and in good faith to the Open-ended Working Group and the Group of Governmental Experts, in order to collectively and collaboratively take forward the goal of an open, secure, stable, accessible and peaceful ICT environment.

I thank you very much.