Webinar hosted by UNIDIR

Assessing the Nuclear Risk Reduction Agenda

Opening Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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Thank you, Renata.

UNIDIR has developed as an important institution under your leadership and it is always a pleasure to participate in one of these thought-provoking events. Also, as an independent authority on all things disarmament-related, UNIDIR continues to bring fresh perspectives to the most pressing arms and international security issues of the day.

Distinguished Panelists,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The report being discussed today, “Nuclear Risk Reduction: Closing Pathways to use”, is no exception. It is a comprehensive analysis that takes a holistic approach to risk reduction, understanding that the concept means very different things to different people, states and regions. It also takes into account the spectrum of factors influencing nuclear risk reduction in the twenty-first century, including the transformative technological developments that have taken place in recent years.

I have consistently noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is teaching the world many lessons. One of the most important is that globally disruptive and previously unthinkable events with devastating consequences can happen suddenly. We must remember that this applies to the potential use of nuclear weapons, either intentionally, by accident or, more likely, through miscalculation.

The current level of nuclear risk is unacceptable. Anyone who has even glanced at the media in recent months will be aware of this. Corroding relationships between nuclear-armed States, coupled with bellicose rhetoric, qualitative and, in some cases quantitative, improvements to nuclear arsenals and the disintegration of the nuclear arms control regime have placed us in a highly precarious position.

It is a position that has not appeared overnight, but rather one that has been coagulating for years and catalyzed by events during the current pandemic. Over two years ago, in his agenda for disarmament, the Secretary-General called for nuclear risk reduction measures to be pursued with a “new sense of urgency” and stressed that such measures should enhance stability and increase security for all.
Of course, and as UNIDIR’s report rightly concludes, the only way to eliminate the risks posed by nuclear weapons is to eliminate nuclear weapons.

However, it is clear that, while the world needs to return to the path of complete, irreversible and verifiable nuclear disarmament, the current moment also requires agreed implementation of measures that will reduce the risk of misperception and miscalculation and reinforce the norm of non-use.

Any use of nuclear weapons would be a catastrophe with ramifications for the entire global community. I would say that it corresponds that the entire international community has a stake in ensuring that such a catastrophe never occurs.

Although it is not a perfect vessel – for example, several nuclear-armed States remain outside its parameters – the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or NPT, remains the best instrument through which to discuss these concerns and to develop possible solutions.

And the best forum in which to have a robust dialogue and find agreement on common understandings about risk and how to reduce it remains the Tenth NPT Review Conference.

The pandemic-induced postponement of the Review Conference, tentatively to January 2021, was indeed disappointing. However, there now exists an opportunity to use this hiatus to narrow divergences and amplify convergence in positions.

I have argued that, in addition to other elements such as strengthened implementation of existing commitments and reaffirmation of the norm against use, a package of risk reduction measures should be an integral part of any Review Conference outcome.

States Parties should use the next six months to try and reach agreement on how risk reduction can be addressed by the Conference and what a possible outcome might look like.

Despite different perceptions about risk reduction measures – including the view that some actually increase risk – many NPT States Parties see this issue as not only potential for
common ground, but as a pressing priority and a near-term contribution they can make to shoring up international stability.

There are some growing areas of commonality, many of them reflected in UNIDIR’s report. The broad-ranging nature of what constitutes risk reduction can, in this context, also be seen as an asset.

I believe the Review Conference could look at three broad sets of risk reduction measures. I should caveat that this is a non-exhaustive list and many more could be included.

Chief amongst these is the need for greater transparency and understanding through enhanced dialogue and engagement. This is needed amongst nuclear-armed States, between nuclear-armed States and non-nuclear weapon States and should extend beyond diplomatic encounters to technical experts, military-to-military interactions and between leaders whenever possible.

Dialogue could pertain to a spectrum of issues ranging from doctrine and numbers, to deployment and testing of new weapons systems, but the aim would be to remove misperceptions and decrease chances of miscalculation. Enhanced engagement could also consider how existing or now defunct confidence-building measures developed during the Cold War could be revitalized.

A second set of measures could relate to crisis communications – how to lower temperatures in the midst of potential conflict. Effective mechanisms and platforms for ensuring communication in a crisis should be examined in order to develop methods that can be utilized in today’s multipolar and multi-regional nuclear landscape.

Finally, the nuclear risks posed by new technologies or weapons with strategic capability must be discussed to better improve transparency and understanding. This includes how offensive cyber capabilities could affect nuclear command and control, concerns about the ability of artificial intelligence to ‘deep fake’ early warning sensors, and the potential for miscalculation created by so-called hypersonic weapons.
Risk reductions in this field could include political declarations not to interfere with command and control structures or methods that clearly define whether a weapon is intended for a conventional or nuclear purposes or even agreements to refrain from deploying destabilizing weapons.

Each of these measures would help reduce the risk of nuclear weapon use but also, in helping to foment trust and confidence, open the door for lasting disarmament measures.

As I said, the postponement of the Review Conference should be treated as an opportunity. Between now and whenever it is held, States Parties have the chance to lay the foundations for success. Developing successful risk reduction strategies could be a key to that success.

One final word - perhaps the most beneficial course of action all States Parties can take at this moment is to exercise restraint in both action and word. This will not only help facilitate an environment conducive to real dialogue and, therefore success, at the Review Conference, but also – and more importantly – reduce the dangers that nuclear weapons pose to us all.

I thank you very much and look forward to the discussion.