‘We are in danger of entering a new cold war’

Anthony Smith interviews Izumi Nakamitsu, the United Nations’ high representative for disarmament affairs.

The New Zealand International Review sat down with Izumi Nakamitsu, the United Nations’ top envoy for disarmament issues and the most senior Japanese national in the multilateral system. In a 30-year career, she has worked on a range of humanitarian, refugee and peacekeeping issues. She reflected in this interview on the herculean disarmament challenges that confront the global community. We also talked about the role of women in society and diplomacy, and the United Nations’ increasing recognition of well-being issues for staff.

NZIR: The UN secretary-general’s Agenda for Disarmament of 2018 talked of a new Cold War. Is that really the case?

Nakamitsu: What I would say is that while our current time does not fully resemble the original Cold War, we are in danger of entering a new phase. We also need to be aware that there are major differences. I have no nostalgia for the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, but in an important sense it was a simpler balance. The Cold War period fundamentally involved two sides who were able to work out significant arms reduction agreements through direct bilateral dialogue. A good example of this was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated an entire category of highly destabilising nuclear weapons.

It is far more complicated today. Cold War tensions have returned. They have returned between the United States and Russia. But clearly the role of China and its increasing competition with the United States is also very important. China will need to play a more active role in arms control. We also have two nuclear armed states and regional rivals in India and Pakistan, and tensions around Kashmir could have very wide ramifications. There are other regional tensions with a possible nuclear dimension and concerns over proliferation, such as in the Middle East. The situation with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea could also deteriorate given the stalled diplomatic efforts. In short, dialogue around the major instruments of international arms control is no longer a question of only getting the agreement of the two so-called Cold War super-powers.

Furthermore, the rapid development in technologies that boost both nuclear and conventional weapons also complicate the arms control picture. I call these ‘combination factors’. Hypersonic missile systems are being developed that travel at nearly six times the speed of sound. This makes detection of such delivery vehicles vastly harder. Cyber-security and artificial intelligence (AI) further present their specific set of challenges, which may potentially relate to the safety and security of nuclear weapons.

Taken together, this is a really dangerous mixture. In fact, I would argue that we are in the most dangerous situation since the darkest days of the old Cold War period.

NZIR: It is interesting to say the situation is much more dangerous today, because I wonder if the public is fully aware of this. Many can recall the 1980s when vast numbers of people took to the streets to demonstrate against nuclear weapons. Is the general public as worried today?

Nakamitsu: In fact, surveys are showing that young people are quite worried about this, and more and more millennials believe that a nuclear attack of some kind is likely within their lifetimes.

One practical barrier to understanding arms control issues in our times is, as I said earlier, the complexity of the situation. Disarmament issues are essentially considered an expert issue. It may appear harder for the general public to understand the scale and scope of it.

NZIR: The old Cold War, particularly after the Cuban Missile Crisis, was characterised by concerted attempts at confidence-building measures — not just arms control negotiations, but dialogue in general, as well as a communications hotline between capitals to avert crises. Could we say that the major powers have similar measures in place to defuse a crisis situation?

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Dr Anthony L. Smith is a member of New Zealand International Review’s editorial committee.
Nakamitsu: The United States and China have built substantial levels of dialogue at quite senior levels of government. Those discussions are on-going. We also see UN P-5 (permanent members of the Security Council) co-ordination, like on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which is of the utmost importance in the run up to the Review Conference. It is also significant that on-going co-operation takes place not just between heads of government, but at secretary and under-secretary level. At a time of great mistrust, it is important that the United States and China have a full discussion on military doctrine in the interests of increasing transparency. Beijing argues that Washington is responsible for spreading the ‘China is a threat’ narrative. In the UN system we always make the point that the best way to counter such ideas is to be transparent. We do not take a position on the claims and counter-claims of either Beijing or Washington. We do, however, argue that the best way to move forward is, firstly, for the United States and Russia to extend the so-called New START Treaty. Should this treaty not be extended, it will expire in 2021, leaving no constraints on strategic nuclear arsenals. Secondly, if China is to be recognised as a superpower, and it certainly deserves recognition as a great power, there would be no better way for China to establish itself as global actor than by a full engagement with future negotiations on nuclear weapons of all kinds, including their delivery vehicles. This is what we consistently point out, but it is easier said than done.

NZIR: You make this point when old Cold War arrangements are weakening or even unravelling. Could a country like China dock into existing or renewed agreements — like the INF — when the United States and Russia are no longer in agreement?
Nakamitsu: There is still a lot of strategic dialogue between the United States and Russia. It would be important that both sides continue to preserve existing gains and extend New START before it expires in 2021.

While it might be the case that the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the INF last year, concerns about Russian non-compliance with that agreement were not new. Concerns about Russia violating the terms of that treaty go back to the Obama administration. European countries have backed those concerns — although we in the UN system lack any independent ability to make a separate determination.

On the other hand, it is regrettable that the United States is no longer leading on a range of disarmament agreements, as we have seen with the Arms Trade Treaty. But the United States is still a critical partner in our disarmament efforts. We very much still need them at the table — alongside Russia and China.

NZIR: Would you agree that instances of using chemical weapons, whether it is in the Syrian civil war or in cases of state-sponsored assassination, have created a terrible precedent when previously countries had once been incredibly reluctant to cross that line?
Nakamitsu: The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is currently under a lot of strain. Furthermore, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) is also under huge pressure and at risk of polarisation. The OPCW is a technical agency that oversees global endeavours to permanently and verifiably eliminate chemical weapons. In response to allegations of chemical weapons attacks in Syria, the OPCW Fact Finding Mission (FFM) was set up in 2014 to establish facts surrounding allegations of the use of toxic chemicals. The FFM’s findings were the basis for the work of the OPCW–UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), an independent body established by the UN Security Council to identify the perpetrators of the chemical weapon attacks confirmed by the Fact Finding Mission. The JIM attributed attacks to the Syrian armed forces and ISIS. Despite several proposals, the Security Council could not agree on extending the JIM and so it ceased operating in November 2017. Following the non-renewal of the JIM mandate and with the support of the majority of the states parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, the OPCW Secretariat established the Investigation and Identification Team (IIIT) with the mandate to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic. Russia, China and Syria consider the decision that established the IIIT as illegitimate. The whole issue has become very political.

NZIR: In the area of new technologies, what keeps you awake at night?
Nakamitsu: I would have to say that AI and cyber-security are leading concerns, particularly when thinking about the safety of conventional and nuclear weapons systems. Many of these cyber-attacks are now automated. States have agreed that international law, in particular the UN Charter, applies in the use of digital technologies. However, there still needs to be further discussion on how international law applies to any of this, such as what the use of force means in the context of a cyber-attack.

On the question of lethal autonomous weapon systems, there are obviously a lot of developments in this area which AI will enable. We would argue that it is imperative that humans retain control over the use of force. Particularly with strategic weapons, humans need to be able to override computerised systems in the event of a false alarm, for example. There is no guarantee that a machine will be able to exercise that judgment. This is the central problem with automation; AI could make decisions in a nanosecond, but meaningful human control must be present to account for, among other things, cases in which such decisions are made on the basis of faulty information.

[Image of Iwarz Nakamitsu visiting the UN Disengagement Observer Force on the Syria–Israel border]
powerment is now a key priority.

NZIR: You have taken on some of the toughest challenges in global affairs. You and your staff deal with difficult and depressing situations. What is the UN system thinking about in terms of the health and well-being of its staff?

Nakamitsu: Attention to mental health is the priority for Secretary-General António Guterres. The secretary-general was the head of the UNHCR for ten years. In this capacity, he dealt with many very challenging situations of human suffering. Many personnel have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. I myself have experienced PTSD. This is something we are recognising internally as an issue that we need to address with our staff.

NZIR: Finally, what leadership priorities have you brought to the disarmament staff of the United Nations?

Nakamitsu: What I learned from Sadako Ogata was that good leadership can make a real difference to any entity within the United Nations. Disarmament issues in the United Nations have historically been dominated by men; but today we are moving closer to parity. Also, what I have wanted to achieve with my staff, who number around 100, is to lift this whole area of work out of the technical silo and bring in the human element. My experiences provided good grounding for me to recognise disarmament as part of a broader, complex peace and security context. That is why I understand disarmament as closely connected to a range of issues, including conflict prevention, gender equity, crime reduction and safer cities.

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