



European Union Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference

**Opening Statement by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs**

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Virtual Event
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H.E. High Representative Mr. Josep Borrell,

Distinguished delegates,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to express my appreciation to the EU and to the consortium for inviting me to speak today and for holding this conference under what can best be described as difficult circumstances.

The European Union and its Member States are among the staunchest defenders of the global disarmament and non-proliferation regime. It is a commitment that is reflected in both word and deed as key political and financial supporters of initiatives to achieve these ends. We are grateful for the EU's commitment and generosity.

I've been asked today to comment on the state of that regime. That is, the web of multilateral, plurilateral, bilateral and even unilateral instruments, arrangements, norms and policies that seek to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, strictly regulate conventional weapons, and ensure that new means and methods of warfare are consistent with international law.

Speaking frankly, the regime is under stress.

Declining relationships between major powers, historic levels of military spending, the emergence of disruptive technologies and potential new domains of conflict, and the growing threat to civilians from increasingly powerful weapons, are all placing increased pressure on the regime.

The risks posed by nuclear weapons – which remain the United Nations' highest disarmament priority – are greater than they have been since the height of the Cold War. Factors driving these risks include the growing role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies, a return to dangerous concepts such as “nuclear warfighting”, and the intersection between technological advancement and nuclear weapons. The bilateral arms control regime is eroding, and the disarmament machinery remains paralysed.

On a more positive note, the impending entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) highlights the enduring commitment of many States to the elimination of nuclear weapons. Likewise, the much-needed renewal of dialogue between the

United States and the Russian Federation is a welcome development. The NPT Review Conference, now further postponed until August next year, faces many challenges, but States Parties now have an opportunity to use this extra time to lay the ground for a successful outcome that strengthens the treaty and, by extension, the regime.

Ongoing divisions over how to respond to the alleged use of chemical weapons threaten to undermine the taboo against these inhumane weapons and the Chemical Weapons Convention. I take this opportunity to once again reaffirm my full support for the integrity, professionalism, impartiality, objectivity, and independence of the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and to echo Secretary-General Guterres' position that there is no justification for the use of chemical weapons by anyone, anywhere and under any circumstances. Those who have used chemical weapons must be identified and held to account. As the arbiters of international peace and security, it is the responsibility of the UN Security Council to show unity and leadership on this matter.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown us the global disruption that infectious diseases can cause and the worrisome lack of preparedness at the national, regional and international levels. A disease deliberately manipulated to be more virulent, or one intentionally released in multiple venues at the same time, would lead to an even more serious global crisis. In order to improve preparedness and response for future threats, serious attention needs to be devoted to preventing this catastrophe.

The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) remains the key instrument to prevent the deliberate use of bioweapons. Although the BWC has established a strong norm against the use of these potentially catastrophic weapons, it lacks an oversight institution, contains no verification provisions and does not have an operationalized mechanism to provide and deliver assistance. The ninth BWC Review Conference, to be held in November 2021, will be a critical forum for States Parties to strengthen this increasingly relevant Convention.

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has also posed new urgency to develop effective responses and solutions to combat the humanitarian impact of armed conflict. Sadly, too few have respected the Secretary-General's call for the immediate cessation of hostilities through a global ceasefire. Over 20,000 people have lost their lives to armed violence since the Security Council endorsed the call in July this year.

The full implementation of existing frameworks and instruments, including the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons (PoA) and the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), is crucial to tackling the diversion of conventional arms, therefore, the devastating effects of the misuse of weapons such as small arms and light weapons. The upcoming seventh Biennial Meeting of States on the PoA will provide a platform for States to further strengthen small arms control at the national, regional, and global levels. Matters arising include the Secretary-General's recommendation for national target setting in the implementation of the Programme of Action; a 'supplementary annex' to the International Tracing Instrument, to address the impacts of new technologies in weapons design; and addressing the diversion of arms to unauthorized recipients.

Practical arms control initiatives such as these require political leadership as well as flexible funding mechanisms. To catalyze such funding, in 2020, UNODA together with UNDP established the Saving Lives Entity, or SALIENT. The United Nations Trust Facility Supporting Cooperation on Arms Regulation (UNSCAR) also continues to support our efforts for quick impact initiatives, and I want to extend my sincere thanks to those EU countries that have generously contributed to these initiatives, and to invite others to consider doing likewise.

As I mentioned, the potential misuse or unintended consequences of technological advances are placing increased pressure on the disarmament and non-proliferation regime, due to the absence of guardrails to prevent this. As this conference has recognized, a key example is the potential implications of the increasing use of artificial intelligence in the critical functions of weapons.

These developments have the potential to trigger arms competition, lower thresholds for the use of force and contribute to crisis instability. They could challenge existing legal frameworks and raise questions about safeguarding the sanctity of human life.

Intergovernmental deliberations at the CCW on the possible need to regulate or restrict levels of autonomy in the critical functions of weapon systems have made significant progress. But despite near consensus on the principle that humans must retain control over weapons and the use of force, agreement on how best to ensure this base requirement remains elusive.

In the absence of common standards and understandings on how international law applies, we risk seeing the operation of autonomous weapon systems that cannot be used in conformity with humanitarian principles or the dictates of public conscience.

Similarly, it is imperative that the normative framework agreed to within the United Nations on responsible State behaviour in cyberspace continues to be built upon and adhered to.

COVID-19 has had considerable implications on cybersecurity as increased reliance on digital technologies has exacerbated vulnerabilities in ICT products and services. There have been reported spikes in spear phishing attacks and suspicious COVID-19 related websites since the start of the pandemic. Cyber operations have also targeted critical infrastructure such as hospitals, medical research facilities and other essential services, including the World Health Organization.

In such an environment, ensuring the success of the two ongoing intergovernmental cyber processes is vital.

This is a brief tour d’horizon of the state of the regime, yet it highlights that while the regime is under pressure, it also has the instruments and mechanisms to achieve its goals – but these instruments need to be fully implemented and backed by Member States.

It also supports what the Secretary-General has been saying for some time – there is a need for new thinking when it comes to disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control in the current context.

The shifting tectonic plates of technology and multipolarity have made the world a very different place from even a decade ago. This environment requires new approaches that build upon the great gains we have made but also seek to address both the challenges and opportunities of the moment.

Such new approaches must also be informed by diverse perspectives and partnerships among different stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored that global, multi-stakeholder action is paramount to a safe and sustainable future. I applaud the efforts of the European Union to advance the full and equal participation of women in disarmament processes, to ensure the voices of youth and civil society are heard, and to seek partnerships with the private sector in developing solutions.

A vibrant and viable future regime depends on this. I am convinced that through the thorough implementation of existing commitments and by thinking creatively about how to meet emerging challenges, the international community can bolster the global regime and, in turn, strengthen our common security. I count on your leadership in this regard.

Thank you very much for your attention and I am looking forward to the exchanges throughout this conference.