



**Annual Meeting of the New York State Bar Association  
International Section**

**“Award for Distinction in International Law and Affairs”**

**Acceptance Speech by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu on behalf of UNODA  
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs**

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Virtual Meeting  
27 January 2021

Mr. Jay L. Himes, Chair of the International Section of the New York State Bar Association,

Mr. Edward Lenci, Chair-elect of the International Section,

Ms. Ruby Asturias and Mr. Jay Safer, Co-Chairs of the International Section 2021 Annual Meeting,

Ms. Janiece Brown Spitzmueller, Chair of the International Section United Nations Committee,

Ms. Carra Forgea, International Section Liaison to the New York State Bar Association,

Ms. Diane O'Connell, International Section Chair Emerita,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour and distinct privilege to accept this award on behalf of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.

The New York State Bar Association, and its International Section specifically, have been staunch supporters of the work of the United Nations for many years.

In presenting my Office today with this award, you have recognized and elevated years of daily, often behind-the-scenes work, by hundreds of professionals, to support the Member States of the United Nations in their pursuit of a more peaceful and secure world. I would like to express sincere thanks on behalf of especially those colleagues who have devoted many years of dedicated service to the broader disarmament community.

Your recognition represents our common understanding that our security in the years to come will depend in large part on our ability to replenish a precious inheritance—trust.

Trust that as nations and individuals, we can act in solidarity for the common good.

Trust that we can further kindle and nurture that solidarity through the laws, norms and institutions developed by each generation for the next.

And trust that, through political dialogue and negotiations undertaken in good faith, we can rein in the very greatest dangers to humanity and our planet.

From the small arms carried by individuals to the nuclear weapons that threaten all of humanity, the continued prevalence of such weapons betrays a widely held assumption that law alone cannot keep us safe.

This assumption, rooted in fear, is also our common inheritance. But for as long as we delay meaningful action to address the numerous and varied ways that excessive arms threaten each of us, we will remain wary of our neighbors and skeptical about our cherished ideals of justice and peace. The phrase “international community” cannot be a veneer for a world suffering from competition and chaos.

There is another way.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On Sunday, we marked 75 years since the very first resolution of the United Nations General Assembly was adopted, envisioning a world free of nuclear arms and all other weapons of mass destruction.

Just two days earlier, on the twenty-second of January, the world’s journey to realize that vision continued with the entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Together, these milestones are a reminder that, while reducing and ultimately eliminating the threat of nuclear weapons remains an enduring challenge, our institutions of multilateral governance offer potent tools to tackle this urgent threat in novel and creative ways.

You need not be reminded that the international regime dedicated to achieving nuclear disarmament is under tremendous strain. Relationships are deteriorating among States that possess nuclear weapons, and those same countries are assigning increasingly expansive roles to those weapons in their security strategies. The danger of nuclear catastrophe is as serious today as it was in the depths of the cold war.

We are not helpless, though, and organizations like the New York State Bar Association have a vital role in our response.

By organizing initiatives like your recent webinar on “Nuclear Weapons and International Law in the Contemporary Era”, where I had the privilege to speak, you are making important contributions to a worldwide conversation on fresh ways to approach this grave danger.

Of course, achieving progress will ultimately require action by governments. Every nation has a responsibility to implement fully the commitments and obligations they have undertaken as parties to the various instruments and agreements that make up the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

And as nuclear risks continue to rise, the world will count on associations of lawyers who can explain the critical role of international law in crafting meaningful responses.

As we move forward, let us seek to reconcile different legal approaches and re-establish a common path towards a nuclear-weapon-free world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

New and emerging technologies pose their own risks and legal quandaries. In areas such as aerospace, cyberspace, artificial intelligence, biology and robotics, new technologies are now being designed and shared faster than at any other point in history.

Many of these technologies have peaceful applications with tremendous promise. But the full range of their possible uses is not always clear, and there is growing international concern that some may be dangerous and destabilizing.

Emerging weapons technologies, in particular, could worsen global arms competition, create new temptations for States to resort to force, and deprive decision-makers of valuable time to defuse crises peacefully.

These new technologies could also pose challenges to existing legal frameworks. It remains open to dispute how international humanitarian law may apply in domains such as cyberspace, and technologically dictated decisions about the use of force could undermine existing efforts to limit the impacts of armed conflict on civilians. The thought of machines making a decision to take a human life is nothing but repugnant.

To mount an adequate response to these technologies, we will need to rethink our current approaches to arms control. This will require intensifying and sustaining dialogue among legal experts, policy-makers, technologists, and other stakeholders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to reflect briefly on the resonance between our world's present challenges and those of 75 years ago.

The global pandemic and its cascading impacts have brought us all moments of discouragement and grief in the past year.

During this time, we paused repeatedly to reflect on the events of 1945.

In August, we remembered the atomic devastation unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Shortly thereafter, we recalled the founding of the United Nations, and with it humanity's determination—renewed by the Second World War—to establish conditions for an enduring peace.

Now, as our search for those conditions continues for an eighth decade, the contributions of the legal profession will remain critical to bringing that high aspiration closer to reality.

At the Office for Disarmament Affairs, my colleagues and I will remain committed to facilitating inclusive dialogue and supporting innovative action for disarmament.

Let me end my remarks with the words of one of my heroes, Dag Hammarskjöld. He said in April 1958 that he had “the belief and the faith that the future will be all right because there will always be enough people to fight for a decent future”. I know you are amongst those people.

On behalf of my Office and the United Nations, I thank you.