United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs

“The Disarmament Agenda: 80 Years After Hiroshima”

Keynote speech at the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference

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Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year marks the 80th anniversary of several era-defining moments whose legacies continue to shape the international order, including the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For the first time, it is safe to say that humanity had the means to annihilate itself.

Yet eight decades later, we continue to roll the dice with these cataclysmic weapons. And we do so in a rapidly shifting international security landscape – one accompanied by intensifying strategic competition, regional instability and erosion of longstanding norms and emerging technologies.

Against this backdrop, the European Union's steadfast commitment to multilateralism is more important than ever. It is not simply commendable; it is indispensable.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the European Union and its member states for their support to UNODA – both financial and political – across all areas of our work.

But as the international context evolves and shifts, so too must our engagement with it.

To understand the future of the disarmament agenda, we must, I think, first acknowledge that today's challenges are evolving faster than the norms and rules meant to restrain them.

These challenges cannot be viewed in isolation – as mentioned, they are interlinked and overlapping. They demand immediate action now to stave off disaster, but also deep reflection about how to lay the ground for the security of future generations.

I want to use today to outline five key immediate challenges and for the future of the disarmament agenda and suggest how to approach them.

First – we must urgently adopt measures to walk ourselves back from the brink and prevent mistakes, miscalculations and escalations.

In today's uncertain landscape, the risk of miscalculation is growing. In light of the interconnectedness of the challenges we face, a mistake in one domain can trigger escalation in another.

During the Cold War, measures such as notifications for launches, exercises and troop movements, agreements on incidents on the high seas and robust strategic crisis communications helped avert catastrophe.

States urgently need to explore and engage on transparency and confidence-building measures from conventional forces all the way up to nuclear arsenals, including the impact of and convergences with emerging technologies.

Second – we need to shore up the great gains of the last eighty years and prevent further erosion of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. This regime, as embodied in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), is facing mounting challenges.

The 2026 NPT Review Conference is not simply another diplomatic milestone. A third consecutive failure to achieve consensus would be a threat to the regime's very credibility. This, in turn, will eventually lead to a hollowing out of the NPT.

To avoid this, States Parties need to be thinking and engaging now. And the engagement is also thanks to the EU support. They need to be flexible, innovative and remember that a strong NPT is in all of our interest.

This leads me to the third point: the need to address the impact of rapidly advancing technologies on international peace and security, we all see it today.

The transformative impact of rapidly advancing technologies is reshaping the international security landscape. Digital technologies - from AI to quantum and ICTs - pose novel risks and raise ethical, humanitarian, and legal questions. While there are benefits to leverage, such as using AI to overcome technical barriers in disarmament verification, we must acknowledge that these technologies are fundamentally altering modern warfare.

Beyond applications in decision support and intelligence gathering, a key concern is their convergence with existing weapons systems, particularly nuclear arsenals. The implications are indeed troubling.

Malicious ICT activity during peacetime can heighten tensions and increase the risk of conventional conflict between nuclear-armed States: raising the spectre of escalation. Interference through hacking or spoofing aimed at nuclear systems could trigger misperception, miscalculation, or even inadvertent use. The integration of AI into nuclear command and control compresses decision-making timelines, increasing the risk of escalation and potentially catastrophe.

As the Secretary-General rightly emphasized, and we continue to emphasize, while nuclear risks will persist until the weapons are eliminated, all nuclear-armed States must agree that any decisions on nuclear weapons remain in human hands, not machines.

Fourth, and I know this is a difficult and sensitive subject, we must confront the global surge in military spending and its implications for international peace, security and development. In 2024, global military expenditure hit a record $2.7 trillion. If trends continue, it could reach $6.6 trillion by 2035 - nearly five times the level at the Cold War's end. The question is not whether defence investments are justified, but whether this trajectory delivers sustainable security. History suggests it does not. Enduring peace has always relied on diplomacy, confidence-building, arms control, and calibrated defence - not arms races.

When states prioritize military security only, they signal a shift away from mutual restraint and toward competitive escalation. This undermines the spirit and substance of disarmament and arms control agreements, built on reciprocal commitment and obligations.

The opportunity cost is substantial. As resources flow into expanding arsenals, longstanding disarmament frameworks - pillars of European and global stability - are eroding. Multilateral institutions that once enabled dialogues, negotiations, peaceful coexistence, and cooperative security are sidelined in favour of unilateral postures. This creates a feedback loop: rising militarization breeds insecurity, which then justifies further military spending.

This imbalance is compounded by stagnating investment in development and critical social and economic priorities. While military budgets grow, financing for sustainable development falters and deepens inequality between and within States, sowing the seeds of future instability. Deterrence might give you an immediate sense of security but cannot address the drivers of conflict, such as poverty, exclusion, and climate vulnerability. Visible loss of solidarity, we discussed this in the previous session, from the Global North for the most vulnerable in the Global South will impact our collective global efforts to restore the international order on the basis of UN Charter and international law – the foundation of our collective security system.

Since its founding, the UN has recognized the link between peace, disarmament, and inclusive development. Indeed, Article 26 of the Charter calls for maintaining peace with minimal diversion of resources to armaments. The Secretary-General's report, *The Security We Need*, reinforces this principle and urges a strategic recalibration toward diplomacy, transparency, and sustainable development. The report is clear: true security is not found in weapons alone, but in a strategic combination of tools and instruments—with human security at the

core. We must forge a new compact, grounded in cooperation and informed by eight decades of hard-won lessons.

<u>Fifth and finally,</u> we need to consider whether it is necessary to reconceptualize the existing arms control frameworks.

The world that gave rise to our current frameworks has changed. There is no question about that. For those frameworks to remain relevant, we must change, too, starting with rethinking the meaning of "arms control".

How do we devise or improve arms control frameworks when dual-use technologies challenge verification or when non-State actors move easily to exploit gaps in governance? How do we grapple with new domains of conflict? What about so-called hybrid warfare? How do we address the blurred line between nuclear threats and strategic non-nuclear challenges?

This is not an argument for abandoning the existing architecture. It is a call for bolstering it: with new tools, new norms and new partnerships. I argue that we should invest intellectual efforts in reflecting on these profound questions now, so that when the international environment improves, you will have some ideas to build your work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe must continue to play a key role in helping the international community to face and overcome these really profound challenges.

The European Union has always been a paramount champion of the regime designed to eliminate WMD and apply strict controls to conventional weapons. It possesses not only the normative power to shape the future of the disarmament and non-proliferation regime but also the technical expertise and diplomatic reach.

I am confident that Europe will continue to lead—not only in protecting its own citizens, but also in strengthening the global system. In that effort, the United Nations will remain your steadfast partner. We very much like to work with you.

Thank you very much for your attention.