



**United Nations Office
for Disarmament Affairs**

**Remarks to the opening of the 81st session
of the First Committee of the General Assembly**

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As delivered



6 October 2026
New York

Mr Chairman, Ambassador Lok Bahadur Thapa,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

I warmly congratulate Ambassador Thapa and the members of the Bureau on their election.

I also pay tribute to Ambassador Maurizio Massari of Italy for his able steering of last year's session of the First Committee.

10-year retrospective of the international security landscape

Distinguished delegates,

If one trend defined the past decade in disarmament and international security, it was the erosion of trust.

Trust between States.

Trust in international norms.

Trust in the institutions and agreements established to reduce risks and prevent conflict.

The consequences have been profound.

Military expenditure reached peak levels—increasing by a shocking 41 percent in the last ten years.

New conflicts erupted with conventional weapons, wreaking havoc on the lives of civilians.

The very nature of those conflicts has been upended by rapid advances in drones and missiles and their wide proliferation.

Withdrawals from the Anti-personnel Landmines Conventions and the Convention on Cluster Munitions have decreased human security, while only contributing to the perception of national security based on outdated and inhumane military capabilities.

We have witnessed a push-back against acknowledging and addressing gender considerations in disarmament and arms control.

At the same time, there is persistent resistance to multi-stakeholderism.

As trust erodes, technology accelerates.

Integration of AI and autonomy across military functions is a new reality.

In outer space, we are drifting from the long-standing goal of preventing an arms race to the need to halt one.

Declining trust has made the goal of nuclear disarmament even more elusive.

Dangerous nuclear rhetoric and the ongoing modernization and expansion of nuclear arsenals have heightened fears of use.

And the only bilateral arms control agreement between the two largest possessors has expired—in other words: there are no caps on nuclear arsenals for the first time in fifty years.

These developments or regressions over the past 10 years are sobering—but there are also some sources of optimism from the last several years.

Membership of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has grown.

There has been increasing emphasis on victim assistance, environmental remediation and the protection of civilians, bringing a more human-centered approach to nuclear disarmament.

The Political Declaration on the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas was agreed by States as a significant milestone for civilian protection.

A new Global Framework on Through-Life Management of Conventional Ammunition came into being.

Emerging technologies reshaped the disarmament agenda, demonstrating how the disarmament machinery can adapt to new challenges—from agreed elements for an instrument on lethal autonomous weapons systems to the consensus establishment of a permanent mechanism on ICT security.

These achievements demonstrate that trust may be strained, but cooperation is achievable.

And they remind us that we have not lost our agency.

Enduring value of the First Committee

We can exercise that agency right here in the First Committee.

The First Committee has proven its enduring value over the decades.

This Committee has initiated a growing number of General Assembly processes—from open-ended working groups on outer space and conventional ammunition, to informal consultations on AI in the military domain to groups of governmental experts on topics like nuclear disarmament verification.

A recent resolution of the Committee initiated the production of the first comprehensive UN study on nuclear-weapon-free zones in 50 years. Another recent resolution established the UN Independent Scientific Panel on the Effects of Nuclear War, which will deliver next summer its comprehensive, multi-disciplinary study on the impact of nuclear war in today's inter-dependent, globalized world, updating the last independent study from 1989.

And the First Committee has always been an incubator of new ideas, outlining emerging priorities like last year's proposal on possible risks of the integration of artificial intelligence into command, control and communications systems of nuclear weapons.

But we know that the First Committee has not been immune to declining trust levels.

Increasing numbers of votes and rights of reply reflect a multilateral environment that has become more divided and more contentious.

But I believe this Committee is able to deliver on its promise.

Three key challenges in disarmament right now- nuclear, missile and AI

Distinguished delegates,

I have spoken already about several troubling developments in recent years.

But I would like to briefly elaborate on a few key disarmament challenges and suggest ways to tackle them:

- 1) First, identifying ways to rebuild trust, preserve norms and reduce risks with a view to concrete progress towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons;
- 2) Second, addressing rising global military expenditure given that durable security requires investment in prevention, diplomacy and development;
- 3) Third and finally, responding to the “technological moment” by tackling military AI before it is too late;

First, the risk of nuclear weapons use, whether by intent, accident, or misjudgment, is higher than at any time since the Cold War.

Seemingly forgotten are the lessons of that period – that arms races, nuclear testing, dangerous rhetoric and nuclear warfighting strategies do not benefit anyone’s security.

Quite the opposite. They will eventually backfire on everyone and undermine every country's security.

The NPT review cycle remains a critical test of collective political will.

But now three successive Review Conferences have failed to produce a consensus outcome.

The credibility of the regime depends on demonstrable progress on agreed obligations across all three of its "pillars".

But I say without hesitation: progress on nuclear disarmament commitments is too slow.

At the same time, proliferation drivers are accelerating – in regions dangerously linked to other States possessing weapons or threatening to set off 'proliferation cascades'.

And access to peaceful uses of nuclear technology is an essential component of the NPT bargain and a practical demonstration of how nuclear technology can contribute to the collective good.

This must be not simply preached but practiced.

So where do we go from here?

The central challenge before us is to rebuild trust, preserve norms and reduce

risks.

We must find ways to translate shared recognition of risks into practical, measurable steps to reduce them.

Action to reduce dangers, rebuild confidence, and strengthen the rules and institutions on which collective security depends is urgent.

Turning to my second point.

Last year, I raised concerns over rising global military spending.

This was in the wake of the launch of the Secretary-General's report on the topic in which he noted that while global military spending soars, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals is faltering.

One year closer to the 2030 SDG deadline, the same message rings true.

World military expenditure rose in 2025 to \$2.887 trillion.

This is the highest level in recorded history.

While arguments persist that “real security” necessitates sky-high military budgets, we should ask ourselves whether this type of spending *actually* makes us safer and what kind of security we are *really* building.

Durable security does not come from military defense alone, but also from addressing the underlying political, economic, social, and environmental drivers of instability both within and across borders.

Practically, we must find ways of bringing military expenditure to the forefront of disarmament discussions and improving linkages between arms control and development, finding the right balance between military security and diplomatic efforts for the prevention of seemingly “inevitable” wars and conflicts.

Third and finally, the security landscape is increasingly defined by emerging technologies, none more so than artificial intelligence.

The Secretary-General has called giving power to AI systems without human oversight one of the greatest power tests of our time.

There is *still* time to make choices about how AI is governed, deployed and constrained.

This is especially important when it comes to the military domain.

Militaries around the world are increasingly incorporating AI applications into daily operations.

Human control and judgment, particularly in decisions involving the use of force, are essential.

But human control alone will not address all of the risks we face.

As military AI applications expand, we must also seek greater trust and predictability between States.

The informal exchanges on AI in the context of international security mandated by this Committee were a critical start to bringing States together, irrespective

of their level of technological development.

The next step is to turn dialogue into practical measures that build confidence, reduce risks, and improve States' mutual understanding of intentions and behaviour.

And because much of the technology is developed outside government, we must leverage the expertise that resides in the private sector, civil society and academia.

Moving forward, we require a dedicated multilateral forum to facilitate this work.

I believe the United Nations provides the right platform for this.

Forward-looking close

Distinguished delegates,

I would like to conclude with a few words about trust and the need to build it.

We are being tested— from threats posed by advancing technologies to capacity challenges to respond to the misuse and illicit trafficking of small arms and light weapons, among others.

To pass these tests, we must continue to invest in multilateralism, especially here at the United Nations.

But effective multilateralism rests on trust.

This is why we need to find very concrete ways of building trust and confidence—practical actions aimed at information sharing and communication, transparency, verification and even constraints.

Transparency and confidence-building measures, TCBMs for short, are *especially valuable* in times of tension.

There is a long history of States utilizing TCBMs as part of the “disarmament toolbox”.

TCBMs have been developed in various international security contexts, including to prevent nuclear war, for conventional arms, ICT security, outer space activities and to support the Biological Weapons Convention.

UN entities, regional and subregional organizations have played a role in adapting these measures to specific contexts and supporting their implementation.

But how can TCBMs be further leveraged to help close the trust deficit?

I encourage States to consider whether new TCBMs are needed and to accelerate implementation of those already agreed.

In relation to AI, new TCBM proposals are taking shape, such as sharing non-sensitive information on evaluation or risk management practices amongst governments and industry.

And in the context of technologies, like ICTs and AI, we know that governments and the private sector can collaborate on TCBM implementation.

Public-private partnerships can support these efforts.

We also need the engagement of young people.

Including youth voices in discussions on trust and confidence-building is key. Their voices bring diverse perspectives, often new and creative, and help ensure that our efforts are effective in today's dramatically changed world defined by technology. We must win their trust to remain relevant into the future.

My message to you all as you begin your work is this:

Consider how this Committee can advance trust and confidence and what role TCBMs can play in bridging divides, reducing tensions and alleviating risks.

Let us actively choose building trust over being caught in division.

I thank you sincerely for the support you have given to me as High Representative for Disarmament in the past almost 10 years.

I thank you very much for your attention and wish you a successful session.