



**“Nuclear Disarmament – a Dream, an Ultimate Goal, a Commitment?”  
A Public Lecture within NONPROLIFERATION.WORLD and  
the Dual Degree M.A. Program in Non-Proliferation Studies  
(MGIMO-MIIS-PIR Center)**

**Keynote Speech by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu  
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs**

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Virtual  
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Dr. Orlov, Vladimir,

Distinguished guests,

Dear students,

Ladies and gentlemen,

My sincere thanks to the PIR Center for inviting me to speak to you today. The last time I spoke in this forum was in-person, and I look forward to the time, hopefully in the near future, when I can be in there in the flesh again. Nothing replaces human touch and spontaneous exchanges.

Dr. Orlov has been a strong friend of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) throughout the years, including by serving on the Secretary-General's Advisory Board for Disarmament Matters. But perhaps his greatest gift to us has been the students of the dual-degree Masters programme under the auspices of the PIR Center, MGIMO and the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. This programme continues to turn out young experts who go on to represent their governments or work for the most important institutions in our field. I am pleased to say that many have also been outstanding UNODA interns. They have been instrumental to our work.

I have been asked today to speak about the prospects for nuclear disarmament. This is obviously a topic that induces divergent opinions.

There is a perception in some quarters that disarmament, and particularly nuclear disarmament, is a naïve utopian fantasy but I say that this could not be further from the truth.

Disarmament has been pursued throughout history because of the hard security benefits it accrues to all parties. From the abolition of dangerous and destabilizing weapons types to the development and maintenance of invaluable transparency and confidence-building measures, disarmament has helped to strengthen human, national and collective security. In conjunction

with other peace and security initiatives, disarmament has always been an integral element of conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution.

In the nuclear age, we can point to the historic arms control agreements between the United States and the Russian Federation that dramatically reduced the daily threat of nuclear war. Or we can highlight the multilateral endeavors that stemmed the proliferation of nuclear weapons through verifiable, binding safeguards. Or the regional endeavors that have created whole geographic zones free of nuclear weapons.

It has also been argued that many of the great gains in nuclear disarmament took place during the aftermath of the Cold War at a time of globally eased security conditions. While this is correct, it is also true that the hard work that led to those gains actually began in times of real tension and still managed to produce such historic outcomes as the Anti-ballistic Missile and Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaties.

Today, there are those who believe conditions are not ripe for disarmament. I agree that security conditions need to be taken into account. However, I would also underscore that disarmament is essential to improving security conditions and maintaining stability.

There is a second important reason why we continue to strive for the abolition of nuclear weapons. This is because nuclear weapons are in a class of their own. Together with climate change, nuclear weapons present one of two existential threats to all life on the planet. Any use of a nuclear weapon would cause a humanitarian catastrophe to which no State could adequately respond.

For these reasons, the elimination of nuclear weapons remains the United Nations' highest disarmament priority.

Through a combination of luck and the good judgement of brave men and women, nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945. But we cannot rely on luck and bravery. Our current geostrategic context should give pause to anyone who believes the threat of nuclear disaster ended with the Cold War.

As the UN Secretary-General Guterres noted recently: “The climate crisis, stark inequalities, bloody conflicts and human rights abuses, and the personal and economic devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have put our world under greater stress than it has faced in my lifetime.”

And this confluence of factors is taking place at a time of nuclear risk not seen since the 1980s. Relations between nuclear-weapon States are ebbing as they seek to compete rather than cooperate. The unprecedented military spending demonstrates a desire to invest in conflict instead of diplomacy. Trust and transparency are waning.

In parallel, nuclear weapons have resumed pre-eminence in national security as dangerous rhetoric about nuclear warfighting is being uttered once more. Every State that possesses nuclear weapons is improving their arsenals to produce faster, stealthier and more accurate weapons. The quality of the weapons now matters as much as the quantity. Yet, for the first time in more than three decades, the gradual reduction in global numbers may have begun to reverse.

The machinery developed to prevent nuclear war and bring about the elimination of nuclear weapons is paralyzed. As the Secretary-General said in the Common Agenda he released to Member States in September, “The world is moving closer to the brink of instability, where the risks we face are no longer managed effectively through the systems we have.”

The geostrategic context is on the brink of some vast systemic changes. The nuclear bipolarity of the Cold War is making way for a more multipolar order. Strategic chains stemming from regional nuclear dyads have the potential to drag in other nuclear-armed States. Escalation ladders have had their rungs pulled out as the chances of conventional wars turning nuclear have accelerated.

Era-defining technologies designed for civilian gain are being re-purposed for military ends, often with not enough forethought into the ramifications. Few or no guardrails exist to ensure the emergence of new domains in cyber and outer space are used only for peaceful purposes.

The intersection between technological advancement and nuclear weapons has exposed potential vulnerabilities in nuclear command and control and early warning. The speed of

communications and delivery systems has truncated the time for decision-making. A growing entanglement of conventional and strategic capabilities could make it difficult to discern at what target an attack was directed.

Should these trends continue, we are likely to see the creation of more and shorter pathways to escalation and increased prospects for accident or miscalculation.

We seem to be in the process of unlearning the hard-won lessons of the Cold War. At this time of friction and fluidity, disarmament is not idealistic – it is necessary.

Out of the mire of gloomy developments, there are two sparks of positivity worth focusing on.

The first is the agreement by the United States and the Russian Federation to extend the New START Treaty and to engage in dialogue on strategic stability on the regular basis.

The second is the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

The resumption of dialogue between the world's largest nuclear powers can only be a good thing. That this dialogue seeks to examine the interplay between nuclear weapons and other strategic dimensions is also beneficial.

The five-year extension of New START also provides a ticking clock for both sides. I really hope they will use the time before the treaty's expiration to lay the ground for the next generation of arms control.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, or TPNW, entered into force in January of this year and will hold its first meeting of States Parties in March of next year. The TPNW has attracted much criticism and it is true that, for the moment, it has a relatively small membership base that does not include any States possessing nuclear weapons or their allies.

My response is twofold. First, the TPNW represents a genuine commitment to multilateral nuclear disarmament by many States and their frustration at the slow progress in recent years. Second, its members would be the first to tell you that it will not take effect overnight. States

Parties and civil society have methodically begun to lay the ground for the Treaty's implementation, including through a considered fact and science-based approach.

Next month provides perhaps the best opportunity test the prospects for disarmament. Commencing on 4 January, the Tenth NPT Review Conference is a rare moment to reverse course, reduce nuclear risk and put us back on the path to our shared goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

It is worth asking, at a time of when arms control is under threat, the disarmament machinery is paralyzed and nuclear competition is rising, why the NPT retains its position as the so-called "cornerstone" of the non-proliferation and disarmament regime.

Let me suggest four answers:

First, it contains legally-binding commitments to nuclear disarmament.

Second, it provides verifiable non-proliferation obligations, policed by the IAEA.

Third, its near-universal status means these commitments and obligations are binding on the vast majority of the international community.

And finally, the NPT is a grand bargain of mutually reinforcing benefits. For this reason, all States Parties gain tangible security benefits.

They may have their differences, but a major point of convergence between NPT States Parties of all stripes is their commitment to the Treaty.

After nearly two years of postponement, it is tempting to see simply holding the Conference as a victory. But the hard work starts now. States need to be ambitious; otherwise, this will be a wasted opportunity at a critical juncture.

There are five key outcomes I believe the Review Conference should pursue.

First, the Review Conference should agree to a set of practical measures to reduce the risk of a nuclear weapon being used, either by design, accident or – most likely – miscalculation. This could include new or updated confidence-building measures, agreed changes to doctrine and posture, as well as enhanced transparency.

Second, risk reduction is not enough. The risks posed by nuclear weapons will only be eliminated when the weapons are eliminated. I hope that the Review Conference will be able to agree on tangible measures in nuclear disarmament, such as commitments to arsenal reductions or timelines for dialogue to that end. States Parties should commit to pursue all measures to finish long-overdue business such as the entry into force of the Comprehensive-Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty and negotiations on a treaty banning production of fissile material.

Disarmament and non-proliferation are two sides of the same coin – momentum in one strengthens momentum in the other. The Review Conference should deliver practical commitments that ensure the safeguards regime administered by the International Atomic Energy Agency is robust and fit for purpose – including through adequate financial and human resources.

And it should consider how States Parties can assist in the resolution of long-simmering proliferation crises in Northeast Asia and the Middle East. At a minimum, the Conference should pledge support for and assistance to dialogue and political measures to resolve these regional hotspots.

Finally, States Parties need to reach agreement on how to strengthen and accelerate implementation of commitments given at previous Review Conferences.

Of course, a successful result from the Review Conference is not going to resolve all of our concerns. But it can act as a jumping off point for a near-term work programme in disarmament. It can act as a catalyst for the kind of thinking and dialogue we will need in order to grapple with the increasing complexities of our current environment.

When he announced his intention to deliver a new Agenda for Peace, the Secretary-General stated that it would include an updated vision for disarmament to help guarantee human, national and collective security. It would need to bolster support for a world free of nuclear

weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, effective control of conventional weapons and regulation of new weapons of technology.

Any updated vision for disarmament will also need to examine the linkages between strategic domains, consider how to include all kinds of nuclear weapons in arms control, understand the nexus between advanced conventional weapons and escalation, address the long-overdue issue of constraints on missiles, and seek new and innovative ways to ensure that States can “trust but verify”.

Beyond nuclear weapons, a new agenda for disarmament should involve a set of commitments to provide the necessary resources for prevention, including at the national level; reverse the upward trajectory of military budgets and ensure adequate social spending; tailor development assistance to address root causes of conflict and uphold human rights; and link disarmament to development opportunities.

And of course, new thinking about disarmament must include the full, effective and equal participation and leadership of women, without whom no meaningful social contract and sustainable disarmament pathway is possible. Those stakeholders whose expertise and influence are essential ingredients should be brought inside the tent. We should look to break down silos between expertise and cross-fertilize our forums.

The United Nations is ready to provide the platform for the kind of disarmament and non-proliferation thinking required to reflect our new reality. It should be a platform focused on inclusivity of stakeholders and across categories of weapons. Above all, it must firmly highlight the essential purpose of disarmament and non-proliferation in broader efforts to achieve peace and security.

I would like to end by talking briefly about young people and their role in the future of disarmament.

The Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The future depends on what we do in the present.” For young people, the world you inherit tomorrow will depend on the actions you take today.

A vision for the future of disarmament must include meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement both within and outside the United Nations. It is for this reason that, on International Youth Day 2019, the Office for Disarmament Affairs launched its youth outreach initiative, “#Youth4Disarmament” and has placed the 3 ‘E’s: Engagement, Education and Empowerment, at the core of our disarmament youth outreach efforts.

We want to increase youth participation and create space for young women and men, girls and boys to make meaningful and substantive contributions to facilitating progress on disarmament. Imparting knowledge and skills to young people empowers them to make a contribution, as both national and global citizens.

Young people also represent a powerful force for change. Initiatives such as #Youth4Disarmament tap into a desire on the part of young people to rid the world of nuclear weapons, which pose an existential threat to humanity, and equip them with the tools to do so.

Education is, as Herbert George Wells suggested, one of humanity’s greatest assets in the race to prevent future catastrophes and this is nowhere truer than with respect to the need to prevent any future use of nuclear weapons.

Through a combination of educational, creative and innovative practices, the #Youth4Disarmament initiative invites youth of all backgrounds, interests and expertise to meaningfully participate in “securing our common future”.

To the students in the audience, if you have not yet done so, I encourage you to get involved with the #Youth4Disarmament initiative. Together we can build a world that is safer, more sustainable and peaceful for all and we can start by raising awareness of why disarmament remains so important in the present. Let’s work together to improve the prospects for disarmament.

I thank you so very much for your attention and look forward to our interactions.