Remarks on the Nuclear Security Summits

By

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Hosted by:
Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the United Nations

New York
23 April 2014
I would like to begin by thanking the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan for inviting me to speak at this event. As the Secretary General stated in his remarks at the opening session of the most recent 2014 Nuclear Security Summit at Hague: “Be the first mover”. This initiative by the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan is a move that we at the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs welcome and acknowledge.

I would also like to thank the Permanent Representatives of the United States, the Republic of Korea and the Kingdom of Netherlands—the hosts of the last three nuclear security summits—for attending this event. Your presence today—and I again quote the Secretary-General—is “a sign of the growing sense of common purpose”. This spirit of common cause is in many ways a pre-requisite to address nuclear security and the threat of nuclear terrorism.

And I do believe we are making progress. First, the Summits have helped to elevate the issue of “nuclear security” from a national to a global dimension, and to do so in a manner that has focused attention at the highest level of government. Second, they have served as a forum for States to take some pre-emptive measures, voluntarily and substantively, to demonstrate their political commitments in this field.

Reducing stocks of dangerous nuclear materials, improving their security, and promoting international cooperation in these areas have much to contribute in strengthening international peace and security. It is impressive to see States recognizing how their self-interests are served by advancing a global interest. Future progress will require States to continue to look beyond their national borders and engage in ways of enhancing transparency and building international confidence. We are seeing the emergence of a global nuclear security framework and a nuclear security culture.

Today, I would like to focus on how the UN is contributing to this unfolding process. We in the Secretariat have been monitoring these Summits closely and we have participated as observers. While we of course recognize that States are the leading actors in addressing nuclear security issues, we have much to bring to this process.

Among the most important challenges facing the world community is the need to build a concrete and verifiable system for implementing nuclear security improvements, along with a culture of nuclear security to strengthen international cooperation. Indeed, a global nuclear security culture underpinned by shared norms and values is indispensable.

Let me now share with you the role of the United Nations on both these fronts.

First, by way of its organizational architecture and legal instruments, the UN provides a strong international framework to assist in addressing nuclear security. For example, the guidance and plans of the International Atomic Energy Agency have helped States to improve the synergy of their nuclear safety and nuclear security activities. The Agency has both the expertise and the mandate to help States fulfil their various commitments in these areas.

A second important contribution of the UN system has been to strengthen the capacity of States to detect and stop illicit trade in nuclear and radiological material. In this regard, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has provided legal and technical
assistance to States through its Container Control programme—assistance that has improved the capacity of States to systematically profile and inspect high-risk containers.

A third prominent contribution of the UN system relates to our activities to assist the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1540 on the non-proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and their means of delivery. Since its adoption in 2004, the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs has actively been assisting interested Member States in their national implementation efforts—this includes facilitating the provision of technical assistance as well as identifying effective implementation practices. Since 2012, for example, UNODA has organized 12 regional or thematic workshops relating to this resolution.

Another contribution of the UN system has been through its Office of Legal Affairs, which has been seeking additional ratifications to international conventions addressing nuclear security, especially the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism and the Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Material. While neither treaty is close to achieving universal membership, this is surely a worthy goal to pursue and one to which the United Nations can contribute. This work is essential in maintaining international peace and security and in strengthening the rule of law—two key goals of the Organization.

Finally and most importantly, a significant and core contribution of the UN system to the ongoing process of nuclear security, as the Secretary-General has stated, comes through our persistent efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. We are encouraging the world to view nuclear weapons as a liability, not an asset.

Disarmament must be treated as a top priority because the very existence of such weapons entails the risk of use—and any such use would have catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would jeopardize not just nuclear security but human security, potentially even the future of our planet. The world community has long agreed that disarmament offers the most reliable means to ensure that nuclear weapons will never again be used. Given the consequences of use, why should the world settle for anything less than the most effective response to this challenge?

This is precisely why disarmament belongs on the global nuclear security agenda. For at the end of the day, nuclear security and nuclear weapons cannot coexist indefinitely. Improvements in nuclear security can only go so far in addressing nuclear threats. They alone will not bring us to a world free of nuclear weapons. But they will nevertheless be indispensable in ensuring that such a world will remain nuclear-weapon-free.

Here is where improvements in nuclear security will make their greatest contributions—not just in preventing nuclear terrorism, but in securing a nuclear-weapon-free world. The goal here must not simply be to secure a nuclear status quo as an end in itself. I believe that it is this link to disarmament that will probably do more than any other factor to ensure that the norms and standards of nuclear security achieve universal recognition. And who can deny that the world would be safer as a result?