Panel VI – Reviewing the role of nuclear weapons in security and other contexts of the 21st century

We welcome the opportunity to discuss the role of nuclear weapons in security contexts of the 21st century. It long overdue to open up a debate within an UN forum. Such a debate runs the risk – and my delegation is here at great risk – that we come to the conclusion that nuclear deterrence is not a valid framework for international security in the 21st century.

Nuclear weapons discourse has been relatively unchanged not only since the end of Cold War, but since the inception of the nuclear age. During that period the humanitarian, environmental, economic and cultural effects of a nuclear detonation were pushed aside to a very large extent. The end of the Cold War did little to challenge this situation. Although we are facing today new nuclear-armed states, new threats and new questions about the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines, the nuclear discourse has been slow to shift in relation to these political and strategic realities.

The UN Secretary-General was talking about sleepwalking into disaster – because in light of the increasing capacity of countries to pass the threshold, the multitude of actors, how can we still talk about a system of nuclear global stability? In a multipolar world, a nuclear deterrence theory that was established in a bipolar world, is simply not applicable any more in our view. Robert Oppenheimer used the metaphor of "two scorpions in a bottle" to describe the situation during the Cold War. But what if there were more than two “scorpions,” a situation that plainly already exists? And what if there were substantial asymmetries between the “scorpions,” including assorted basic differences on the matter of so-called “rationality?”

There have been comments from several states at this OEWG session and elsewhere that the security aspects of nuclear weapons require more recognition. Indeed, the humanitarian initiative is about the security of all of us. We agree that the geopolitical environment has to be considered and this is exactly the reason why we are pushing for more efforts towards nuclear disarmament. In our analysis, it is precisely because...
of the current difficult security environment and not despite of it that nuclear disarmament has to be pursued with urgency.

[Last week we were talking about the risk of an accidental or mistaken nuclear weapon detonation. But to a certain extent, nuclear deterrence strategies as such depend on risk, unpredictability and extreme consequences. Nuclear weapons do not necessarily have the intended deterrent effect and for small nuclear arsenals the quest for such an effect requires a posture of asymmetric escalation that increases the pressure on the command and control systems, and could lead to accidental launch or misperceptions. Just because nuclear weapons were not used during the Cold War, we cannot complacently assume that “deterrence works.” There were several incidents where humanity came perilously close to the nuclear brink, from the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis to NATO’s Able Archer exercise in 1983, which Moscow thought was a prelude to war. Our reliance on nuclear deterrence to preserve peace has been described as a “desperate gamble” given the risks involved.]

As nuclear weapons–possessing states continue to insist on nuclear weapons for their own security and defend nuclear deterrence theory, the humanitarian focus counters this with an alternative narrative focusing on consequences and risks. This is driven by a deep concern about the overall health of the NPT regime and the conviction that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is also caused by the continued insistence on the value of nuclear weapons. By insisting on having nuclear weapons for their own security, states that have them promote the concept of nuclear weapons. How can we ensure proliferation doesn’t happen if those that have nuclear weapons equate it with powerful status and with the necessity for their own security? SG Ban Ki-moon has said that „the doctrine of nuclear deterrence has proven to be contagious. This has made non-proliferation more difficult, which in turn raises new risks that nuclear weapons will be used.

Security is indivisible. In a global village we are all affected. That holds true even more so when it comes to the use of weapons with huge transboundary effects. It is striking how widely accepted the concept of nuclear deterrence is, given the paucity of real evidence in support of it.
Q1: How can an approach to global security that continues to be built on the credible threat of indiscriminate mass annihilation and destruction that endangers all humanity and possibly all life on earth be **compatible with a 21st century understanding of international cooperation, global interconnectedness, morality and international law**?

Q2: We have heard state interventions that stressed – sometimes regretfully – that in spite of their long-term wish for a world free from nuclear disarmament they still feel the need for the protection by nuclear arms. **My question therefore is if reliance on nuclear deterrence and professed support for nuclear disarmament are not essentially mutually exclusive concepts?**