GLOBAL

UN nuclear disarmament rep ‘counting on Canada’ to help bridge tricky international divides

By MIKE LAPOINTE  FEB. 20, 2020

'Disarmament is not something idealistic or a utopian ideology,' says UN high rep for disarmament affairs Izumi Nakamitsu, and that it's 'part of security.'

The UN’s high representative for disarmament affairs Izumi Nakamitsu says 'disarmament and arms control agreements have always sought to be an instrument for national security and collective security.'  UN photograph by Eskinder Debebe
ith the risk of a nuclear detonation believed by the UN to be at its “highest level since the end of the Cold War,” the head of the body’s disarmament office says Canada is uniquely positioned to help play a uniting role between divergent parties at the UN’s upcoming nuclear weapon non-proliferation treaty review conference.

“Canada has exactly the kind of profile of a country that can actually bring [parties] together and try to forge a common ground,” said Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN’s high representative for disarmament affairs, in a sit-down interview Feb. 19 with The Hill Times. “Rather than focusing on differences of positions, you can help us to identify what might be a uniting factor between those different positions.”

Ms. Nakamitsu was in Ottawa this week for an address at the University of Ottawa hosted by the Canadians for a Nuclear Weapons Convention (CNWC), a group dedicated to informing Canadians on the increasing danger of nuclear proliferation and nuclear war. The group is supported by more than 1,000 recipients of the Order of Canada. She also met with Parliamentarians, including Liberal MP Rob Oliphant (Don Valley West, Ont.), parliamentary secretary to the foreign minister.

Ms. Nakamitsu said it was the UN’s belief that the risk of a nuclear detonation, “whether intentional or by mistake or miscalculation,” is “definitely the highest since the end of the Cold War.”

“We’re living definitely in increased insecurity, but also in unpredictable situations,” said Ms. Nakamitsu, who also pointed to recent increases in global defence spending.

According to a recent report from the International Institute for Strategic Studies, global defence spending rose by four per cent in 2019 from the year prior, with spending in the U.S. growing by 6.6 per cent. China’s spending also rose by 6.6 per cent.

“So there is hard data, more information, statements, announcements about deployments of new weapons, whether that’s hypersonic missiles or so-called low yield, smaller nuclear warheads, all sorts of things
stated and announced,” said Ms. Nakamitsu. “That is a very clear deterioration of the international security environment.”

The 2020 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference is scheduled to be held at the United Nations in New York from April 27 to May 22.

According to the CNWC’s recent letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Que.), a succession of key nuclear treaties have been abandoned by the international community since 2000, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 2007, the Iran nuclear deal with the U.S. in 2018, and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement in 2019. “Those international security instruments, regimes, agreements, that were in fact maintaining the stability in the world for at least a couple of decades, are now, in front of our eyes, eroded, on the verge of collapse, and those instruments actually do matter,” said Ms. Nakamitsu.

The review conference falls on the 50th anniversary of the NPT being entered into force, which Ms. Nakamitsu points out was made possible at the height of the Cold War.

“So when people say that the security environment is so difficult, [that] it’s not a time to discuss disarmament, it’s historically not correct,” said Ms. Nakamitsu. “In part, disarmament and arms control agreements have always sought to be an instrument for national security and collective security.”

“Disarmament is not something idealistic or a utopian ideology, but this is part of security,” said Ms. Nakamitsu.

**Canada has invested ‘quite a lot’ around fissile material discussions**

One of Canada’s major policy goals around nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament is the negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).
“Such a treaty would halt the production of the material that gives nuclear weapons their explosive power, and thus eventually halt the production of nuclear weapons,” according to the government’s website. “An FMCT is a part of Canada’s step-by-step approach to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.”

“Maybe it didn’t have [the attention of the public], but, for example, in the areas of fissile materials, Canada has invested quite a lot in terms of facilitating discussions,” said Ms. Nakamitsu. “The fissile material issue is still a gap—there have not even been negotiations that have taken place.”

Although Canada has been a leading proponent within the international community on calls to negotiate this cut-off treaty, as the CNWC points out in their letter to Mr. Trudeau, the UN’s designated forum for negotiating treaties—the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament—“has been deadlocked and has made no progress on a promised treaty, actively championed by Canada, to block further production of fissile materials for weapons purposes.”

Fissile material used for weapons purposes includes plutonium and highly enriched uranium, which are essential materials for making nuclear weapons.

“Canada has been taking the lead for the past several years and leading the discussions, bringing together member states, and there is so much substance now through these Canadian-facilitated discussions,” said Ms. Nakamitsu. “More or less, we have the entire substance of an entire treaty figured out, and that work has been really [done] by Canada.” In July 2018, a UN group recommended that the negotiation of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices “begin without delay.”

The wide-ranging and complex disarmament field is also subject to divisions between the “P5” states, which are recognized by the non-proliferation treaty as nuclear-weapon states and are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, including China, France, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S.
“At the moment it’s really divided—it’s divided between the P5, it’s divided between nuclear weapons states and non-nuclear weapons states, it’s divided within nuclear weapons states,” said Ms. Nakamitsu. “Because you are a member of NATO, an important member of NATO, you can also make sure that the United States, the powerful nuclear weapon states, will engage in the NPT review conference in the spirit of positivity and flexibility.”

“All of those things Canada can do using its own sort of unique diplomatic status and positions and profiles,” said Ms. Nakamitsu. “I’m counting on Canada.”

*The Hill Times*