Secretary-General's address at the Opening Ceremony of the Munich Security Conference [as delivered]

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an enormous pleasure for me to be back since last year's session.

And if I remember well, last year, on discussing the global threats we are facing, I concentrated on, in the absence of power clear relations, on the multiplication of new conflicts and at the same time the fact old conflicts seem never to die, be it in Afghanistan, Somalia, or in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And indeed, when power relations become unclear, unpredictability and impunity became the name of the game, and as my grandfather used to say, "there is no longer any respect." And some things happen, conflict appear everywhere with devastating humanitarian consequences.

And I remember having noticed that those conflicts are becoming more and more interrelated and more and more related to a set of a new global terrorism threat to all of us.

If you look at the map from Mali to Nigeria to Libya to Somalia to Syria, Iraq at the time, to Afghanistan, Yemen, all these conflicts are interrelated, with people fighting going from one to another, people there going back to their countries of origin, and all these conflicts are clearly related to this new threat of global terrorism.

Now, we also noticed that in this context, dramatic violations of international humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law were taking place, with people suffering enormously, and that it was practically impossible to guarantee accountability in relation to these terrible violations.

Now one year afterwards, I have to recognize that the situation has not improved. On the contrary, the problems I described remain. But we have two new qualitative changes that make things considerably worse.

Number one for the first time since the end of the Cold War we are now facing a nuclear threat. A threat of a nuclear conflict. And I am naturally referring to the developments in relation to nuclear weapons and long-range missiles by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: a development made in total contradiction to the will of the international community and in clear violation of several resolutions of the Security Council.

It is important to note that the unity that the Security Council has been able to demonstrate the will of the international community and has been able to put through sanctions a very meaningful pressure over North Korea, and that pressure in my opinion is absolutely essential to be maintained.

But the pressure also creates the opportunity for diplomatic engagement aiming at the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula; a denuclearization that I believe we all want to be peaceful and within the framework of a regional security framework.

It is true that in recent weeks we witness an improvement in Korean relations.

I was myself in the Olympic games of PyeongChang and it is always with emotion that we see North Koreans and South Koreans together in a competition like this one and of course that fact that the dialogue within the two Korea's was re-established is a positive one; and especially the fact that the hotline between the military of the two countries was reestablished was an important factor to avoid misunderstandings and escalations.

But even if the relations between the two Koreas improved, let's be clear that is not the central question we are facing. The central question remains the question of denuclearization.

And the question of denuclearization, in my opinion, requests that we all engage actively in order to be possible for, I would say, the two key stakeholders in relation to this crisis, the United States and North Korea, to be able to come together and have a meaningful discussion on these issues.

I believe United States is ready to do so and recent statements by the Vice-President demonstrate that it is absolutely essential to keep the pressure over North Korea and to convince North Korea that it is absolutely vital for them to come to the table and to be able to find a way for this denuclearization, a peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula to be possible.

Obviously, there is a role for all the other countries of the so-called six party talks, obviously there is a role for the international community. It is important that we all abide by Security Council resolutions. It is important that we all participate in this need for pressure over North Korea but it is also important not to miss the opportunity of a peaceful resolution through diplomatic engagement as a military solution would be a disaster with catastrophic consequences that we cannot even be able to imagine.

The second qualitative change that, I believe, exists relates to what we are witnessing today in the broader Middle East, where I think we are facing a true Gordian knot.

We always had conflicts in the Middle East since the beginning of civilization and in the last few decades, we got used to a succession of conflicts and crisis but always with this idea, perhaps naïve, that the international community would be able to deal with each one separately or in succession.

We have witnessed the Arab-Israeli conflict and then progressively transformed into a Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

We have witnessed the civil war in Lebanon and then the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

We have witnessed the different conflicts in which Iraq got involved and the most recent developments in the country and finally with the so-called Arab Spring, we have seen the conflict in Syria, in Yemen, in Libya.

But as I said until recently we always got the impression that things were more or less under control and each of these situations could be handled separately, even if it was more and more obvious that there was an interrelation among them.

And that interrelation became even more clear when Da'esh with its operations made the Iraqi crisis and the Syrian crisis so obviously interconnected.

What I think has changed, clearly, is that today, the whole global Middle East became a mess.

It became a mess with a number of different fault lines that are completely crossing each other and interconnected: the fault line that remains between Israelis and Palestinians; the fault line that represents the memory of the Cold War, that is still there; the fault line between Sunni and Shia.

And if you look at these fault lines I described, it is clear that there is a very special position of a country like Iran that has a fault line with Saudi Arabia and its allies, a fault line with Israel and a fault line with the United States; all these things naturally making the situation extremely complex.

And more recently, I would say a Sunni-Sunni fault line, very clear in relation to the crisis of the Gulf Cooperation Council that has, I am sure, many reasons explaining it, but in which a central aspect must be the different perspectives that exist about the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the context of the region.

Now, all these different fault lines crossing each other have created a situation that is an authentic quagmire.

And if you look at the perspective of the different countries, that quagmire becomes more and more evident with the possible exception of Iraq, where, even if things could have gone tremendously wrong, if there was a civil war after the referendum in Kurdistan, the truth is that it was possible to overcome that difficulty.

And I have been in Kuwait just two days ago, and there was a very clear show of confidence by the international community in the process of stabilization in which Iraq seems to be embarking at the present moment. And let's hope the elections will confirm the vision of a democratic, non-sectarian Iraq.

But with this exception, all the other situations are getting worse.

The Israeli – Palestinian peace process is at a dead end.

If one looks at Syria, after the hopes created by the de-escalation that has reduced the conflict in several areas of the country, the truth is that we are now seeing a reignition of that same conflict in Idlib and in eastern Ghouta, with dramatic humanitarian consequences.

We have seen the Turkish operation in Afrin.

We have seen chemical weapons again reappearing.

We see risks of fragmentation of the country.

And I remember that in the past, Israel used to look into the Syrian conflict as some kind of a distraction in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But in my recent visit to Israel, I noticed that the perception of the presence of militias very close to Iran, close to the Israeli border, and the perception of a potential arc between Teheran and Beirut allowing for the enhancement of the Hezbollah capacities, seems to be to many Israelis an existential threat.

And the events of just one week ago show how dangerous this can [be] for the situation in the Syrian context.

I would say, the worst nightmare we might be able to face, would be - and I know that both Israel and Hezbollah do not want it - but the worst nightmare would be a new war between Hezbollah and Israel, that would mean the devastation of large parts of Lebanon.

And we know that any spark can trigger it, and that we are far from being reassured that that conflict is impossible.

On the other hand, we see that in Yemen, still no chance of a political dialogue starting.

At the same time, we see that different perspectives in the Gulf Cooperation Council has not only very complex implications within the Gulf, but it has now destabilizing effects in Somalia and in other areas of the Horn of Africa, which means that all these situations seen together represent, what I said, a Gordian knot.

Obviously, we have not been idle in the United Nations.

We are actively engaged in any initiative that can relaunch a peace process that seems to be, as I said, in a dead end, in relation to Palestinians and Israelis with the deep belief that only a two-state solution can address both the interests of the Palestinian people and the Israeli people.

We are totally committed to relaunch the Geneva process, finding a political solution for Syria – the intra-Syrian dialogue in Geneva - now that in Sochi, it was possible - and I have to pay tribute to the Russian Federation on this - to fully abide by the engagements that were taken and to guarantee that Sochi was not a parallel process, but on the contrary, was reaffirming the role of Geneva, and

channeling into Geneva the results of what was decided there, fully in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

We will do everything possible to reactivate, to energize the Geneva process.

At the same time, we are totally committed in supporting the stabilization in Iraq. Just to give you an example, the United Nations is involved – in Mosul – in 700 projects that employ about 10,000 people. Which means how strongly we are committed to helping Iraq regain its role in the region.

And we will do everything possible also to stimulate the possibilities of a political dialogue to take place in relation to Yemen.

And simultaneously we have been supporting the Kuwaiti mediation and the efforts of the United States of America, in order to make sure that the Gulf Cooperation Council crisis comes to an end.

But it is obvious that we are dealing in a fragmented way with the reality that is now a holistic reality and requires a common vision.

It is the common vision that is absent.

If, in relation to the Korean situation, we see the unity of the Security Council, unfortunately, that unity is completely absent in relation to the situation in the global Middle East, and particularly in relation to the situation in Syria.

Now, I believe that there is an effective risk of escalation in several of the areas of the region, and some of these forms of escalation that can have absolutely devastating consequences that it is difficult for us to even imagine.

That reason justifies in my opinion that, even if the contradictions of interest of both the global powers and the regional powers are clear, I think the threat for all of us, and the threat for them, first of all, would justify a serious effort to come together and to try to cut this Gordian knot.

There are several interesting suggestions on the table. For instance, I remember that during the Cold War – the old Cold War - the Helsinki process was an important moment to help the two groups come together and establish a platform for discussion.

When I look at the Cold War in the Gulf, I ask myself whether something similar could not be put in place, allowing for at least some form of dialogue to encourage these countries to come together and to find ways to address the very complex contradictions that they face and the very complex differences of interests that indeed exist.

The situation in the global Middle East, is in my opinion today a qualitatively different threat that we face that requires the mobilization of all our efforts, in order to be able to fully address it.

Let me say a few words about another global threat that I believe is more and more in the concerns of us all: and that is related to the cyberspace.

When one looks at today's cyberspace, it is clear that we are witnessing, in a more or less disguised way, cyberwars between States - episodes of cyberwar between States.

The fact that is we have not yet been able to discuss whether or not the Geneva Conventions apply to cyberwar or whether or not international humanitarian law applies to cyberwar.

I think it's high time to have a serious discussion about the international legal framework in which cyberwars take place and I think it would be essential to use what is the competence of the First Committee of the General Assembly of the United Nations to do it, and to do it sooner rather than later.

But the concerns go far beyond cyberwar, the concerns relate to what is today the permanent violation of cybersecurity.

What is the multiplicity of activities – some by States, some by different actors, and even by amateurs? What are the different uses that criminal organizations and terrorist organizations are making of the web?

All of these create a level of threat that is becoming higher and higher and for which we have not yet found an adequate response.

Not only the different methods of regulation, both at State level and through international conventions do not easily apply to a situation like this, but there is even an absence of consensus in the international community about how to regulate the so-called internet of things.

I am one of those that defend that only through a multiple stakeholder approach we will be able to make progress. I believe it is necessary to bring together governments, the private sector involved in these areas, civil society, academia and research centres, in order to be able to establish at least some basic protocols to allow for the web to be an effective instrument for the good.

I don't intend that the United Nations has a leadership role on this, but I can guarantee that the United Nations would be ready to be a platform in which different actors could come together and discuss the way forward, in order to find the adequate approaches to make sure that we are able to deal with the problem of cybersecurity… especially now that artificial intelligence that is providing enormous potential for economic development, social development and for the well-being for all of us, is also in the opinion of many an existential threat to humankind.

All this creates the need for a serious effort in which we need to all embark to be able to have in relation to the web, a proactive form - if not traditional regulation - at least the level of discipline that would be necessary and the capacity to take into account the ethical values that are necessary to make it an element of good for mankind.

Now, it is clear that all these threats are taking place in the context in which simultaneously, we feel that climate change is running faster that we are, in which we feel inequalities are growing in the world, even if the progress generated by globalization and technical development is enormous; and in which we feel that governments and other entities have been unable to properly manage the problems of human mobility of refugee and migration flows.

And all these facts combining are creating levels of mistrust between public opinions, citizens, and political establishments, and international organizations like the UN, that put into question the cohesion of societies, and also that creates doubts about globalization and multilateralism.

And this is a reason why, I believe, we need to be able to unite, we need to be able to affirm that global problems can only be addressed with global solutions and that multilateralism is today more necessary than ever.

That unity is essential if we want to combat the polarization of our societies and if we want to affirm the importance of multilateralism.

And this is also the reason why I am so committed to reform the United Nations, to make the UN more able to respond to the needs and aspirations of we, the peoples, that generated this organization.

But it is also very important that we unite ourselves, in order to make sure that the Paris Agreement is respected and with an enhanced aspiration, with an enhanced ambition, as we are all aware that even the commitments made in Paris are not sufficient in relation to climate change.

That we engage together in making globalization a fair globalization: and we have through the Agenda 2030 an important UN contribution for what could be a meaningful debate for global cohesion in relation to the global development process.

And especially, to engage ourselves to unite the decision makers, leaders all over the world, to understand that the peace and security problems that we are facing today are so serious, at the level of threat [that] is so high, that it is much better to come together than to persist in the level of divisions that we are witnessing today and still paralyze the Security Council for instance, in many of the dramatic crises that we face.

It might be naïve to think that with the level of contradiction that exists today in the world that unity is possible; but I think it is more naïve to believe that divided, we can survive facing the challenges that we are facing in today's world.

And so my strong appeal is to overcome our differences, to overcome our contradictions and to understand that to face all the challenges that today that mankind, humankind, is facing, we absolutely need to come together.

And this is the raison d'être of the United Nations.

And this was the vision that led many visionaries in the end of the Second World War to create the United Nations.

And what I believe we need is to learn with what happened with the League of Nations to make sure that the same will not be repeated at the present times.

We need to understand that the level of threat we have demand, from all of us, a much stronger bet in the cohesion of our societies and in the unity, building a true and strong multilateralism to address the challenges of the present times.

Thank you very much.