

2025 World Conference against Atomic & Hydrogen Bombs

Hiroshima, 6th August 2025

Keynote Speech – Amb. Alexander Kmentt

It is a great honor to be in Hiroshima for the commemorations of the 80th anniversary of the first use of atomic bombs in 1945 and to participate in the 2025 World Conference against A & H Bombs. I thank Gensuikyo for inviting me again — also in recognition of Austria's strong commitment to global nuclear disarmament, including our leading role in advancing the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). My statement today, however, is made in my personal capacity.

This is my second visit in person after August 2014. Then, I met several Hibakusha, some of whom showed me the exact locations where they had been as children when the bombs exploded. Their stories — deeply personal accounts of lives scarred in a single terrible moment — were profoundly moving. In international diplomacy, nuclear weapons are often discussed in abstract terms. It is easy to forget what they truly are: weapons of mass destruction. That is why the testimonies of Hibakusha and nuclear testing survivors are so vital. They are the true experts on nuclear weapons.

Sadly, the situation today is far worse than in 2014. The Hibakusha's call of "no more Hiroshimas" is not being heeded. Global nuclear developments almost all point in the wrong direction: nuclear arms race dynamics are visible, long-term investments are underway in all nuclear-armed states, and some are expanding their arsenals. The institutions and legal frameworks built over decades are weakening and increasingly unable to manage rising risks. Hard-won diplomatic and security gains are being rolled back.

The risk of nuclear conflict is growing amid geopolitical tensions in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Russia and the DPRK have issued overt nuclear threats. The recent conflict between India and Pakistan highlighted the risk of escalation. Only days ago, disconcerting rhetoric emerged from the two states with the largest arsenals. And, we observe loose talk about using "tactical" nuclear weapons that risks normalizing the use of nuclear weapons. The

so-called “nuclear taboo” is eroding. The Doomsday Clock now stands at 89 seconds to midnight — the closest ever.

What’s most troubling is how this dangerous environment is prompting nuclear-armed states and their allies to double down on their reliance on nuclear weapons. We see this in Europe and Asia. The belief that nuclear weapons deter aggression and, thus, provide security is deeply rooted — but it creates a vicious cycle: more arms races, more distrust, more proliferation, and a weaker disarmament regime. Most of all, it raises the risk of nuclear escalation, miscalculations or, accidents and, hence, the existential threat nuclear weapons pose to humanity.

The problem is that there is no certainty regarding neither the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence nor its ineffectiveness. Nuclear deterrence remains a theory. It is a psychological and communicative construct, heavily reliant on assumptions of rational behavior, predictability, and stability. The often heard claim that nuclear deterrence has prevented large-scale war and nuclear conflict in the past is equally impossible to prove conclusively. It is also an assumption that creates a causality which ignores other factors. It is an even greater assumption to use this to proclaim a certainty that nuclear deterrence will work as assumed in the future. It is therefore misleading to present nuclear weapons as a “security guarantee.” They are anything but a “guarantee” and it may be a fatal misjudgment to put so much trust into the concept of nuclear deterrence.

Moreover, nuclear-armed states do not possess a “nuclear deterrent” in any tangible or assured sense. They possess weapons of mass destruction that they hope will influence others in certain ways. But while we cannot know if deterrence works, we know for sure that it *can* fail — and when it does, the consequences could be global and irreversible.

The reality is that humans make mistakes and cannot always control technology, emotions, or perceptions. We know from past accidents, miscalculations and cases of sheer luck that nuclear catastrophe was narrowly avoided. Assuming that people will always act rationally, that systems will never fail, and that miscalculations can be avoided and that our luck will hold is a dangerous illusion — It is rooted in hubris, not realism. How confident can we be that deterrence will hold in all potential conflict zones — in Europe, the Indian subcontinent, the

South China Sea, North Korea, or a future nuclear-armed Middle East? Nuclear deterrence works — until it doesn't. And the consequences of failure would be catastrophic.

Moving away from nuclear weapons is undoubtedly a challenge for states that are used to seeing them as essential to their security. But that very belief fuels global insecurity and an ethos of fear, encourages proliferation, and raises existential risk. We cannot afford to wait for some supposedly “better” security environment. The greater today's security challenges, the more urgent the need to abandon the notion that peace can be built on the threat of annihilation.

A nuclear-weapon-free world requires a paradigm shift: that states no longer see nuclear weapons as guarantors of security but as existential threats. They must be understood not as assets but as enormous liabilities for our common security — high-stakes risks to all humanity.

How can such a shift be achieved, especially among states deeply invested in nuclear deterrence?

The “Humanitarian Initiative” remains the most effective approach. It focuses on the scientific facts of the consequences of nuclear weapons and the risks of their use. Hibakusha testimonies were crucial in shaping international opposition among non-nuclear states, culminating in the 2017 adoption of the TPNW. Their voices remain essential. Combined with scientific evidence, they helped reframe and refocus the debate — from alleged military utility to proven humanitarian cost.

Recent research shows that nuclear conflict consequences are even more severe and complex than previously thought. Beyond the initial devastation, nuclear use would overwhelm response systems, cause global environmental and socioeconomic damage, and impact generations. These cascading effects would threaten humanity's survival. And we still do not fully understand the full range or interaction of these consequences.

The same applies to nuclear risks. Most experts are concerned about the range of risks and the difficulty of understanding or controlling them. The ability to control escalation and avoid miscalculations or accidents is highly uncertain. New technologies like artificial intelligence and cyber vulnerabilities increase these risks further.

The nuclear weapons policies of armed states and their allies create a global web of risk shared by all humanity, including those not relying on nuclear weapons. The more we understand the humanitarian consequences and global risks, the less legitimate the current nuclear weapons based security paradigm appears. Relying on nuclear deterrence comes at the cost of common security.

The urgent conversation must be: what kind of security do we really seek — and for whom? What is the more prudent and realistic approach: continued reliance on weapons of mass destruction, or a serious and deliberate move away from the paradigm of nuclear deterrence?

There is arguably far more reliable evidence about the catastrophic consequences and risks of nuclear weapons than there is about the effectiveness of deterrence. Nuclear policy should be informed by this evidence — with prevention as the guiding principle. The current deterrence framework, which cannot afford a single failure, deserves far more scrutiny than it receives today.

This is the logic behind the TPNW — the Nuclear Ban Treaty. It formalizes the rejection of nuclear weapons based on their unacceptable consequences and risks. Since entering into force in 2021, it continues to gain support. However, we have not yet been sufficiently successful to get states that rely on nuclear weapons to engage with this conversation.

Changing a belief system such as nuclear deterrence is hard. But it is possible — and best achieved with facts and scientific evidence. We need a global, inclusive, and evidence-based dialogue — one that seriously weighs the theoretical assumptions behind deterrence against the known risks of nuclear weapons.

I am convinced the testimonies of survivors, along with the growing body of humanitarian and scientific evidence — now reflected in the TPNW — continues to offer the clearest path to the transformational change we need.

Most of all, we need more open discourse within our own societies. When I come to Japan, I'm always impressed by civil society's active role. Today's meeting is further proof of that. This is not the case everywhere. In many countries, people know little about nuclear weapons or feel powerless to change anything.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the complex jargon of nuclear strategists and experts. But the key question about nuclear weapons is a straightforward one — and one that all citizens everywhere are entitled to ask: Are nuclear weapons truly a “guarantee” of peace and stability? Or is the very existence and maintenance of global annihilation too dangerous and uncertain — because eventually, the risks will materialize? What is the evidence and what are the facts for both questions?

The TPNW is grounded in the belief that we must move beyond nuclear weapons. It is strongly supported by my own country, Austria and the clear non-nuclear majority of states. We will continue to promote the profound arguments and conclusions on which it is based. It offers a concrete framework for that shift — a serious investment in international law and shared human security. In a bleak global context, it is a rare and vital ray of hope for humanity that nuclear disarmament is not a utopian dream, but a rational, realistic, and urgent necessity.

Let me close by saluting civil society in Japan for your tireless work. Change will come through informed citizens — through engagement like that seen here in Hiroshima. Your efforts inspire all of us working toward a world without nuclear weapons.