

Speech by Minister of Foreign Affairs Stef Blok at the Rethinking Arms Control Convention in Berlin on 6 November 2020

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure to speak here today about a timely yet enduring topic.

A topic that's changing at the speed of light, but requires our constant attention.

A topic that needs to be rethought carefully.

And not just once, but endlessly.

Preferably also at the speed of light.

Because keeping up with new weapon technology is essential.

Let me ask you an important question.

What do a falcon, a horse and an elephant have in common?

Not their appearance, that's for sure...

The answer is that each of these creatures has played a part in humanity's history of war.

In their own way, they have each contributed indirectly to casualties in our wars.

Yet at the same time, these creatures are completely innocent.

The humans who deployed them are not.

Why are you asking me this? you may wonder...

Well, it's all pretty straightforward when it comes to animals.

But not when it comes to modern weapons.

In the same vein, I have another question...

What do a chariot, the Roman road network, and night vision goggles have in common?

Each of these are innovations that have taken humanity to the next level...

...bringing us wealth, freedom and security.

But at the same time they've pushed humanity backwards.

Or maybe I should say that they did so at first.

Because these technologies were invented for war and military purposes. Only later were they used for civil applications.

Ever since the discovery of fire, we've been making inventions that take us forward but at the same time can put us at a disadvantage.

And we're still doing that today...

...including technology that we use on a daily basis.

When I touch my phone, it immediately recognises me.

Facial recognition.

It offers me convenience and security.

I no longer have to remember my password.

It's a wonderful example of digital progress.

But when a Uyghur walks the streets of China, he does so in fear.

Fear of being recognised by cameras, for example, that are specifically trained to pick out Uyghurs.

But above all fear of the consequences.

Of the government that might want to imprison him.

Facial recognition...

...in this case, it's a sad example of human decline.

A technology that – like so many other inventions and advances – can be used for military purposes.

In this context, the true difference between the ancient chariot and the 2020 algorithm or drone is not the modernity of the technology itself, but the character of the era in which they were invented.

We're living in a time where political, economic and military developments are not only accelerating, but are also becoming increasingly intertwined.

Take the technological war between China, Russia and the United States.

It's not only a battle for technological leadership, but also a much broader battle for geopolitical power.

For domination...

Technological... economic... military...

A line of thought described and endorsed by Vladimir Putin, who said years ago: *'Whoever becomes the leader in artificial intelligence will become the ruler of the world'*.

In this interwoven reality, it's difficult to distinguish whether dual-use technologies like quantum computing, biosecurity and artificial intelligence are being applied for military or civilian purposes...
... especially as digital applications are primarily developed in the private sector.

This makes regulation, including export controls, a complex endeavour.

And we've also seen how dual-use technology can fall into the hands of malicious non-state actors, such as terrorists.

There's no such thing as a warlike, malicious horse, chariot, algorithm or drone...

...but sadly there is such a thing as warlike, malicious people and regimes.

It's pointless to prohibit technology that can simultaneously bring us just as much good as bad.

So the Netherlands is not in favour of comprehensive, general regulations aimed at possible future weapon systems.

Our basic principle is that legal and ethical concerns need to be addressed without interfering with positive applications and innovations.

What's more, new technologies are too diverse in nature to be covered by such broad-based policy.

It's much wiser to regulate human action and work together to set standards.

For example in the international Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the CCW.

Under this convention we're clarifying, considering and developing aspects of the operational and normative framework for applicable autonomous weapon systems.

As chair of the CCW, I recently called on countries to join this treaty.

Over the centuries we've built up a robust system that in theory should be able to control the current technological developments in weapon systems.

But our system of international law is only robust if the international community shows political backbone.

And the law itself only works if we adhere to it.

It's the only way to control and regulate the production, distribution and deployment of new weapon systems.

So arms control and disarmament can only succeed if there is international cooperation and – even more crucially – international commitment.

Agreements should not just be signed and ratified.

They must be upheld and respected.

The Foreign Ministers present today have therefore signed a political declaration, in which we seek to strengthen the role of the EU in promoting arms control for a new technological age by renewing commitment to the goal of an effective global arms control architecture.

In addition, the Netherlands is also calling on countries to organise and implement their legal weapons review process in a transparent manner, and to share the results of completed weapons reviews internationally.

Legal reviews, mandatory under the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, require states to determine whether a new weapon can be used in compliance with international law.

However, the low number of states that actually conduct such reviews is a concern.

More states need to fulfil their legal obligations in this regard, so that we can achieve the desired goals.

At the same time, we must consider how international law applies to new weapon systems.

Here, the Netherlands is looking at how to apply the existing international legal framework to new technologies.

In this respect, thinking also requires research.

We need to understand the scope of current threats.

Another important question to address is how exactly weapon technology falls into the hands of terrorists or rogue states that could use it to harm as many people as possible.

Are current arms control and disarmament tools sufficient to address these threats?

Our aim is to take the legal debate on these complex issues to the next level, to share views and to create a common understanding.

Next week we're holding an expert meeting with legal specialists to examine this.

Based on the results, we'll consider follow-up steps.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Just like the chariot, roads and the postal system, war and terrorist attacks are, sadly, human inventions too.

Inventions that we can and must address through international law.

We're living in a hybrid reality:

The drone that brings medicines to help the sick could also be a vicious flying improvised explosive device bringing death and destruction.

Valuable research into the spread of avian flu also generates knowledge that could allow the disease to be used as a bioweapon.

And the technology employed in self-driving buses that bring our children home safely can also be used to create autonomous weapon systems.

It's up to the common denominator in these cases whether new technologies are used for a force for good.

It's up to us humans, indeed.

Thank you.