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Remarks at the Roundtable Discussion on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty hosted by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies and the Permanent Mission of Malaysia to the United Nations

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New York
25 October 2018

Your Excellency Ambassador Yaakob,
Dr. Potter,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to the Permanent Mission of Malaysia to the United Nations and the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies for having asked me to take part in today's roundtable discussion on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – the NPT.

I want to congratulate Ambassador Yaakob on his appointment as Chair of the third preparatory committee session of this NPT review cycle. I can assure you that the Office for Disarmament Affairs is looking forward to working closely with you and providing the utmost support to achieve a successful conclusion next year.

Supporting the 2020 NPT Review cycle is among the highest priorities of my Office. I welcome all initiatives, such as this, that remove negotiators from the basement of the UN's Conference Building and allow them to engage in an informal setting on the challenges and opportunities facing us on the road to 2020.

Even though we find ourselves on the home stretch of the preparatory process leading to the next Review Conference, the impending 50th anniversary of the entry-into-force of the NPT should give us pause to reflect on the achievements of the Treaty. Born at the height of the Cold War, the Treaty has survived the end of that conflict and finds itself now, perhaps, at the birth of a second Cold War. Despite an often challenging and always evolving international landscape, the NPT fulfilled its core task: whereas US President John F. Kennedy, speaking in 1963, imagined the world might soon have 15 to 25 nuclear-armed States, today there are only 9. The NPT's ability to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons is an unvarnished success and has made the world a safer place.

There is, however, no time for complacency. After the inability to secure consensus at the last Review Conference, and in the face of increasingly acrimonious debates on nuclear disarmament at the United Nations, concerns are growing for 2020.

One thing is clear: If the NPT is to retain its status as the beating heart of the disarmament and non-proliferation regime and a bastion of international peace and security, the 2020 Review Conference must clearly show progress has been made to strengthen all three of its pillars.

This is obviously difficult when even the diagnosis of the current state of play is contentious. While States universally lament the deteriorating security environment, they disagree on what this means

for disarmament. There are those who believe the current environment means we must go slow on disarmament and then those who believe we cannot go fast enough.

Either way, the Review Conference should work to find a way beyond this impasse.

I encourage the Chair-designate of the third session of the Preparatory Committee to work together with the presumptive President of the Review Conference to make sure that the opportunity presented by the 50th anniversary is not missed. One possibility includes the holding of a ministerial segment at the beginning of the Review Conference that could culminate in the adoption of a ministerial declaration. Such a ministerial declaration, kept separate from the substantive negotiations later in the conference, could focus on uncontentious areas of agreement, highlighting the continued importance and relevance of the Treaty.

In his disarmament agenda "Securing our Common Future" the Secretary-General gave some suggestions for how Member States can return to sincere, substantive and results-oriented dialogue on nuclear disarmament. He called upon States to respect each other's legitimate security interests, but also to acknowledge the frustrations and concerns over the pace of disarmament that led to the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The Secretary-General also recognized that future progress must be built on the implementation of past commitments, including through the specification of concrete benchmarks and timelines. This is especially important in the 2020 NPT context, where many commitments adopted at successive Review Conferences remain outstanding.

We cannot hope for success in 2020 without progress on previous undertakings. The nuclear weapon States have an opportunity to contribute through actions both small and large. On the smaller end, a resumption of reporting on standard information in accordance with Action 21 of the Action Plan would send an important signal. A joint affirmation of the maxim that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought would also help to set the right tone.

Backsliding on Cold War-era arms control agreements is not only undesirably in its own right, it would also cast a pall on the Review Conference. For that reason, I encourage the United States and the Russian Federation to resolve their differences over the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty through dialogue, as provided for in the treaty's articles. In addition, the United States and the Russian Federation could take steps towards the extension of New START.

All States parties could contribute to devising a set of measures to reduce the growing risks of a nuclear detonation, including transparency and confidence-building measures, or declarations not to deploy destabilizing weapons.

Finally, States parties should recognize that the challenges to the non-proliferation regime are not static. States parties must ensure the regime is able to deal with emerging proliferation concerns of the 21st century, especially those related to new technologies.

We should not forget that non-proliferation and disarmament are two sides of the same coin – backwards movement in one begets backwards movement in the other.

In the nearer term, there is the question of what the third session of the Preparatory Committee do can do to help achieve a successful outcome. At the bare minimum, I hope that the session accomplishes the administrative tasks set out for it, so that we can hit the ground running in 2020. The procedural groundwork for innovative approaches such as the holding of a ministerial segment would have to be laid. Perhaps most importantly, States should use the opportunity of the Preparatory Committee session to set the right tone for 2020. After years of increasingly rancorous debates, I would urge delegations to focus on what is possible, and to make concrete recommendations for the Review Conference itself. This would be an important contribution to a return to genuine dialogue between States.

The stakes for the 2020 Review Conferences are high. Much has been written about the dangers of a second consecutive failed Review Conference and what perils such a failure could bring to the Treaty itself. On the other hand, however, let us not forget that 2020 also brings with it a great opportunity. Beyond helping to ensure the continued success of this essential treaty, a successful Review Conference could set a more positive tone more generally and to thus help to unstick other discussions in multilateral disarmament fora.

My Office and I will continue to do everything in our power to ensure a successful third session of the Preparatory Committee and a successful Review Conference. I look forward to hearing your ideas to that end during this afternoon's discussion.

I thank you.