UNODA United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs

James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies Workshop on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: The 10th NPT Review Conference: Prospects and Pitfalls

Keynote speech by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

As delivered

Annecy
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Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Please let me begin by saying how wonderful it is to once again be at this event – the famous Annecy NPT Workshop – in person. The last two years have taught us the many virtues of virtual events, but gatherings such as this truly add value when they are held face to face.

My sincere thanks to the James Martin Center for inviting me. I especially want to thank Bill Potter, not just for hosting, but for his commitment to the NPT and the regime it upholds. For too many years to count, Bill has been a trusted friend and partner to the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs.

We are here, in Annecy, in person, because we share that dedication to the NPT and because we understand the irreplaceable benefits that the NPT provides, not only for its States Parties, but the entire world. It is a cliché to call the Treaty the "cornerstone" of the regime, but that does not make it any less true. The NPT is a load-bearing column of international peace and security. To use a term from another context, the NPT is simply "too big to fail."

The Treaty has been challenged in the past. But the laundry list of challenges facing the Tenth Review Conference is unprecedented. In the two months left until the Conference, it is time to take action.

It is not my intention to sound like a scold tonight, but the States Parties in this room have a special responsibility – to maintain the continued health and vitality of the NPT, to make sure it is fully implemented across all three of its mutually reinforcing pillars and to ensure it remains fit for purpose in a rapidly evolving environment.

That responsibility demands you lead by example. It requires that States Parties move away from rigid national positions and engage with each other to find ways to narrow the gaps between positions and to reinforce areas of common ground.

You must make the most of opportunities like this – the chance to speak frankly, listen with acuity, and gain a better understanding of how we can all work together towards our common goal: a strengthened and enduring NPT.

As I noted, the winds are blowing against us. The Russian invasion and the war in Ukraine, in many senses, has shone a very bright light on the cracks in the façade of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime which have started to emerge some time ago.

These include openly hostile relationships between nuclear-armed States, where distrust has replaced dialogue and transparency is no longer in fashion. Historic levels of military spending, not least on nuclear weapons. The emergence of cyber and outer space as potential domains of conflict. And the repurposing of era-defining technologies to create new generations of conventional weapons with strategic capability.

We have seen so-called modernization programmes leading to what can be best be described as a qualitative arms race. The prominence and roles for nuclear weapons in national security strategies have expanded. We hear dangerous rhetoric about fighting nuclear wars.

Regional conflict is fueling proliferation drivers and could drag in nuclear-weapon States. The war in Ukraine has revived the false narrative that nuclear weapons provide the ultimate security guarantee, undermining non-proliferation.

In 2020, the issue of nuclear-powered submarines was barely on the radar. Now it threatens to be a major division.

And, of course, there is the perennial issue of the chasm-sized gap between states on the implementation of the treaty, especially commitments made under Pillar I.

The role of the NPT and, in the near-term, of the Tenth Review Conference, in reversing these trends and addressing these challenges cannot be overstated.

The suite of obstacles we face must not be a reason to accept defeat as a fait accompli. It is not a reason to abandon ambition. I still believe that States Parties will do their utmost achieve a consensus outcome.

On the issue of an outcome, there are three things I would like to emphasize.

First, the inability to achieve a consensus outcome will not necessarily undermine the regime. What will jeopardize the NPT and the tangible benefits it provides is if States Parties use the Review Conference only to criticize each other, and do not approach the Conference with a willingness to listen, negotiate and compromise. A Review Conference wracked by divisive actions will endanger the central role of the Treaty.

Second, it is important to remember that there is no template for a successful outcome. Each previous outcome was different. That means States Parties can be creative in crafting what an outcome looks like and in adapting to the unique dynamics of this Conference.

Third, while we must strive for a balanced outcome across all three pillars of the Treaty and while there are important priorities under each of those pillars, based on States Parties' positions to date, consensus will not be possible without willingness to demonstrate progress on disarmament.

To this end, I believe there are still several areas in which this Review Conference can make progress. You'll forgive me if, as the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, I skew toward Pillar I.

First, all States Parties should reaffirm their commitment to the norm against the use of nuclear weapons. The further weakening of the taboo against use endangers everyone. States Parties should also reaffirm their commitments to strengthening the norms against proliferation and testing.

Second, States Parties should reaffirm all commitments they have undertaken as parties to the NPT. They should have a real conversation about accountability for the implementation of these commitments.

Third, the Nuclear Weapon States should reaffirm their joint January Statement. Beyond this, although the current situation makes it difficult, they should commit to returning to dialogue on arms control and strategic stability at the first available opportunity.

Fourth, States Parties should agree to a set of measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war, including at the nexus between technology and nuclear weapons. These could include transparency and confidence-building measures or strengthening of crisis communications.

Fifth, the Review Conference should identify practical disarmament steps. This could include commitments by NWS to dialogue to end the burgeoning qualitative arms race, how States Parties can accelerate long-overdue elements such as an in-force CTBT or a prohibition of fissile material production for nuclear weapons, as well as strengthening efforts to verify the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Sixth, the impact of peaceful uses is only growing. States Parties are placing increased value on the non-energy uses of nuclear science and technology in areas a diverse as health, agriculture, and water. The technologies can play an important role in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Ensuring access for all States Parties to these benefits would be a major success for the Conference.

Seventh, the Conference should strengthen the safeguards system, including through universalization of the Comprehensive Safeguard Agreement. It should also agree to make sure the IAEA has the necessary financial and human resources to fulfil its essential role.

Eighth, the Conference should consider how it can add value to the resolution of regional proliferation crises in Northeast Asia and the Middle East.

None of the measures I outlined in my statement should be impossible. But they will require States Parties to approach the Review Conference in a spirit of flexibility, and with a willingness to negotiate and compromise.

I want to conclude today by stating that the rapidly evolving geostrategic environment demands that we not be short-sighted.

It is my sincere hope that the Review Conference also recommends a reassessment of whether the international community has everything it needs to confront the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, including if existing structures should be adapted and whether we need new tools.

This could include addressing ungoverned spaces such as missiles, non-strategic nuclear weapons and missile defence. It could address the blurring line between strategic and conventional weapons. The Review Conference should think about how to construct a regime that reinforces human, national and collective security.

We have much work ahead us but little time. I hope the inability to meet in person over the last two years will spur you to use this moment carefully and to really engage on what we need to do to preserve this vital element of all our security – the NPT.

I thank you very much for your attention.