Virtual Event hosted by the Commonwealth Club

“Reducing Nuclear Weapons: Stopping the War that No One Wants”

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Thank you, Dr. Duffy [President and CEO, the Commonwealth Club]

We have heard about the growing dangers posed by nuclear weapons and the factors that are precipitating the increasing possibility of their use. Suffice to say, the potential for the use of nuclear weapons is higher than it has been since the darkest days of the Cold War.

I think the real problem is that there is a clear absence of trust, diminishing transparency and a resulting reliance on military instead of diplomatic solutions. It is an evolving and very fluid environment in which the dangers of miscalculation are really magnified. So, it requires an urgent return to dialogue, agreement on transparency and confidence-building measures, and proper consideration of not only how to preserve the great gains already made but also to pursue disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control in a changed environment.

I want to emphasize here that we at the United Nations see disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control as important tools for security and not as an idealistic or utopian philosophy - if you will - and I would argue that historically there used to be that understanding between the superpowers even during the Cold War. At the multilateral level I believe that the NPT, with its review cycle, remains the best mechanism to facilitate the achievement of these goals.

As I have said on so many occasions, the NPT is a pillar of international security for three reasons: 1) it contains verifiable non-proliferation obligations, 2) they are legally binding disarmament commitments, and; 3) its near-universal membership means that these commitments and obligations are assumed by the vast majority of the international community.

I think the diversity of membership, including most of the developing world, is important because a nuclear war would have global consequences as we all know. In this context, while arms control agreements may be of limited membership they are of value to the entire international community. Likewise, all States have a responsibility to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons and while multilateral approaches to disarmament are not the only paths to take, their inclusivity helps to create strong global norms, which is also quite a key.
As many of you know, the Tenth NPT Review Conference has been postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis. But it will be held, and the States Parties and other stakeholders should really use this hiatus as an opportunity to lay the ground for success.

I think there are several ways in which States Parties can use the Review Conference to reduce the growing danger of nuclear weapon use and get us back on the path to a world free of nuclear weapons.

Let me just suggest five very quickly: **first**, they can reaffirm their commitment, hopefully at the high level, to the NPT and all commitments they have assumed as parties. **Second**, they can return to the logic of President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev by collectively recognizing that a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought. **Third**, they can agree on risk reduction measures and confidence-building mechanisms – including on verification and compliance. **Fourth**, they can agree that challenges to the non-proliferation regime are not static and therefore the regime cannot be either – it really needs to be adapted to the evolving threats of this century. **Fifth**, the Review Conference should be a springboard for dialogue on how to think about disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control in today’s geostrategic conditions.

An obvious development that would considerably help success at the Review Conference would be the extension of the New START in order to avoid both the dangerous situation of unconstrained nuclear competition and also to buy time for further negotiations. It would also be a demonstration of the United States’ and Russian Federation’s implementation of their Article VI commitments.

In concluding, the pandemic is teaching all of us that international crises can only be resolved through solidarity, compassion and strong institutions. I think these are the lessons that can translate also to the challenges of international peace and security and especially to nuclear weapons, and I hope these are the lessons that we all are learning.

Thank you.