The NPT at Fifty: Maintaining Momentum towards the Review Conference

Virtual High-level Panel Discussion
hosted by the Permanent Missions of Ireland and Costa Rica

Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

New York (Online via Zoom)
11 May 2020
President Robinson,

Ambassador Byrne Nason,

Ambassador Carazo,

Ambassador Zlauvinen,

Thank you and it is a pleasure to join you all at today’s event, which marks a quarter of a century since the indefinite extension of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Permanent Missions of Ireland and Costa Rica for initiating this virtual event which I think is consistent with their dedication to the pursuit of a nuclear weapon-free world, to the multilateral disarmament framework and to the NPT in particular.

The COVID-19 virus that is ravaging our global community is a collective challenge the likes of which we have not seen since the UN’s foundation. As an international community, defeating this pandemic must be our foremost mission, using every measure at our disposal.

However, we cannot, and should not forget that the other potentially calamitous dangers facing the world, including the threats posed by nuclear weapons, have not receded.

In fact, in recent weeks, relationships between nuclear-armed States appear to have worsened. Nuclear modernization proceeds apace, rhetoric about their utility has been reinforced, and the arms control regime continues to fray.

In this context, the NPT remains one of the strongest bulwarks against the use of nuclear weapons and a central forum to create practical steps towards their total elimination. Ensuring that the treaty is able to fulfil these roles, despite the circumstances, should be indeed a priority for all States Parties.

Current conditions require that we keep this agenda at the forefront of people’s minds and continue to strive for momentum. I hope that States Parties will use the postponement of the
Review Conference as an opportunity to work with one another and engage in the dialogue needed to forge convergence at the Conference. Only sincere dialogue, negotiation and compromise will produce an outcome that charts forward progress across all the three pillars of the Treaty.

I want to congratulate Ambassador Zlauvinen and his Bureau for the work they are doing in keeping States Parties focused and engaged. I take this opportunity once again to highlight that I am ready to help however I can.

For however many months we have between now and the Review Conference, I encourage all States Parties, as well as civil society and other stakeholders, to partake in events such as this one. We need the critical and creative thinking that can be generated by a plurality of voices – disarmament activists and the hibakusha, think tanks, industry, the world’s youth and, not least, women. Let us move away from rote positions and instead commence a genuine conversation.

The indefinite extension of the NPT took place at a tipping point in history. The Cold War had thawed and States Parties saw the Treaty as the appropriate multilateral vehicle to cement some of the most important lessons of that period – that a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought and that the only way to eliminate the risks posed by nuclear weapons is to eliminate nuclear weapons.

1995 produced a true bargain, one based in the NPT’s historic success in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons but that balanced all three of what are now known as the Treaty’s ‘pillars’: disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

It also represented a triumph of negotiation, with its package outcome an example of flexibility, compromise and seeking an outcome for the greater good.

Now, in 2020, the world is a very different place.

It is a fluid and evolving environment that has created less stable and more uncertain strategic conditions. In many ways it is an environment that necessitates new ways of thinking – including about the challenges posed by not just nuclear weapons but all armaments.
And it is an environment in which we need the NPT as much as ever, as a force for stability and a forum in which to generate progress.

The Tenth Review Conference is an opportunity to steady the ship by taking stock of the current situation and developing ways in which to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons, including through the full implementation of the NPT’s commitments and obligations. This includes by reaffirming the lessons I mentioned earlier.

It is also an opportunity to think about the future – to look out at the next twenty-five years and see how the NPT can continue to strengthen our common security.

In terms of a specific outcome, while this is the prerogative of States Parties, I would strongly urge using this hiatus as a time to consider what an outcome should look like. It is important to remember that there is no template beyond the need for both backward and forward-looking reflections on the Treaty.

It is also worth remembering that failure to secure a comprehensive outcome document at the Tenth Review Conference will not doom the Treaty or the nonproliferation regime. Failure to achieve any concrete outcome will, however, serve to undermine the value that so many States place on it and, in turn, devalue the review cycle as a way to not only strengthen the implementation of the NPT, but also the regime as a whole.

It goes without saying that any outcome needs to strike the right balance across all of the three pillars, but I defer to the expertise of others on Pillar III, and as the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs I will use today to focus more on pillars one and two.

I have consistently said that there are five outcomes I would like to see from the Review Conference.

First, a high-level reaffirmation of commitment to the Treaty and to all obligations undertaken as a Party to it, including the Nuclear Weapon-States’ unequivocal commitment to the goal of total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. Second, as I mentioned, a recommitment to the norm against the use of the nuclear weapons. Third, the development of
risk reduction measures that can help take the world away from the prospect of nuclear weapon use and towards nuclear disarmament. Fourth, States should recognize that challenges to non-proliferation are not static and, therefore, the regime cannot be either. All States Parties should support the universal application of the strictest safeguards measures available.

Fifth, and finally, I hope the Review Conference can ‘look above the parapet’ and serve as a springboard for thinking on how to address the evolving nuclear weapons challenges of our time.

COVID-19 continues to teach us many lessons. Chief amongst them is that global crises require unity, solidarity, cooperation and strong institutions. It is also teaching us to put humanity at the center of our security. These are lessons that can translate into the NPT context I believe.

I look forward to discussing these issues in the question and answer session.

Thank you again, Geraldine [Byrne Nason] and Ambassador Carazo for this initiative.