

Oslo Nuclear Forum 2020: Challenges to the NPT

Statement by Ambassador Gustavo Zlauvinen

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

I want to thank the University of Oslo and the Oslo Nuclear Project, and especially Professor Braut-Hegghammer, for the opportunity to speak today.

I always appreciate talking with a knowledgeable audience and that is one of the most exciting things about the Oslo Nuclear Project – the excellent work it does in educating young people about nuclear issues, in raising awareness and in inspiring critical thinking from bright minds on the most important nuclear issues of the day.

I also want to express my gratitude to the Government of Norway. Norway has a proud history as a committed supporter of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Its consistent leadership on nuclear disarmament verification is just one example.

Many of you will know that I was not expecting to be President-designate of the Tenth Review Conference of States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, better known as the NPT. But as the US poet May Sarton said, “Life is always bringing you unexpected gifts” and I am enthusiastic and excited to undertake my mission to facilitate a fruitful Review Conference.

The COVID-19 has, of course, changed the world in drastic ways and I would like to express my deepest sympathies and solidarity with all those who have suffered through this dreadful pandemic. It has impacted the Tenth Review Conference as well, forcing it to be postponed from its original dates. Despite this delay, I firmly believe that the Review Conference can still achieve its goals of a strengthened non-proliferation and disarmament regime, no matter when or how it is held.

That is something I intend to speak to today – how to ensure the NPT is fit for purpose to address the challenges it faces, and to the broader regime of which the NPT is rightly touted as the “cornerstone”.

And in today’s international climate, there are multiple challenges facing the NPT.

But it is easy to talk about challenges, so I also want to talk about opportunities for the NPT and the regime as a whole. For example, I believe this COVID-enforced hiatus is an opportunity. It provides more time to find convergences, overcome divergences and to engage in the dialogue between States Parties that is crucial to laying the ground for negotiations at the Review Conference.

For this reason, as President-designate I continue to engage in consultations with the States Parties through the NPT regional groups, to listen to their concerns and, more importantly, their ideas, for how to achieve success. It is also why the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, in partnership with various institutions, has held a series of virtual events related to the core issues of the Treaty – to ensure the opinions and ideas of experts are injected into States’ thinking.

It is not for nothing that, fifty years after its entry into force and twenty-five years after its indefinite extension, the Treaty retains such importance for so many countries. Originally conceived as a temporary stop-gap measure, the NPT has evolved into much more. It is a load-bearing pillar of international peace and security, it is the primary vehicle to achieve progress on nuclear disarmament, it is an essential framework to facilitate the benefits of peaceful nuclear energy, and it is the principal bulwark against the spread of nuclear weapons.

There is a constellation of treaties, instruments and agreements that make up the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, but the NPT remains its beating heart due to three key facts. First, it contains verifiable non-proliferation obligations that provide confidence in countries’ nuclear activities and enable the peaceful use of nuclear science and technology. Second, it is the only Treaty in force that contains legally binding disarmament commitments, including by the five nuclear-weapon States. And third, the NPT’s near-universal membership means that these commitments and obligations are assumed by the vast majority of the international community.

The key to the NPT's success has always been about balancing its multiple elements – the three mutually-reinforcing pillars of non-proliferation, disarmament and peaceful uses. Advances in one of these areas beget advances in others, but the opposite also applies.

So, why is the Review Conference important to overcoming the challenges to the regime while maximizing the opportunities? Due to its membership and the paralysis that has affected other bodies, the NPT review cycle has become the multilateral forum for nuclear disarmament and for dialogue on some of the most pressing international security issues. It brings together nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear weapon States from different regions to discuss a broad array of issues and to reinforce the myriad of tangible benefits derived from the Treaty. Its forward-looking nature also allows it to consider the emerging issues that will affect implementation of the Treaty in the future.

However, as I noted, the NPT and its regime currently face what I see as two sets of interlocking challenges. There are those that are internal to the Treaty and have been problematic for some time. Then there are those that are external and exacerbate internal dynamics.

The first set of challenges includes divisions over the pace and scale of nuclear disarmament, and the implementation of commitments given at previous Review Conferences – not least the commitment by nuclear-weapon States to the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. The frustration and concerns over the pace of disarmament led many countries to negotiate the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which, as you may know, it is now also a point of contention among NPT parties.

The long overdue implementation of the 1995 NPT resolution to establish a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and all other Weapons of Mass Destruction also remains fraught. After all, it was this issue that broke consensus at the 2015 Review Conference.

Other ongoing challenges include how to address the issue of withdrawal from the NPT, as the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a stark reminder of how a party can obtain nuclear know-how and then leave the Treaty and its constraints.

The second set of challenges – the external issues – are developments that continue to impact the regime. Chief amongst these are global security conditions defined by poor relations between nuclear-weapon States and the absence of trust and confidence, coupled with the collapse of the nuclear arms control regime and the development of new nuclear weapons systems that are faster, stealthier and more accurate. Together with the return to prominence of nuclear weapons in national security strategies and rhetoric about nuclear warfighting, nuclear risks are reaching dangerous levels not seen in decades.

Rapid advances in technology have the potential to both increase nuclear risk and pose challenges to non-proliferation. For example, developments in cyber and outer space, as well as artificial intelligence have exposed potential new vulnerabilities such as the hacking of or otherwise interfering with command and control systems, or for other problems arising from unanticipated effects of technology, or for dangerous escalation possibilities as conventional and strategic domains are ever more closely intermingled.

In parallel, barriers to proliferation are being lowered by the manipulation of digital communications, such as the use of the so-called ‘dark web’ to support illicit procurement networks, and in advances in manufacturing, such as additive manufacturing or “3D printing”, which dramatically reduces the footprint and, therefore, visibility, of production.

Finally, concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons are not decreasing. This includes regional contexts where conflict already exists, such as in the Middle East and Northeast Asia, where the DPRK’s nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes undermine stability, threaten civilian populations and risk the entanglement of larger nuclear-armed countries

It would be naïve not to acknowledge the many challenges precipitated by the unique context in which we find ourselves. Yet at the same time, it is important to recognize that the current climate does present several opportunities and the pathways to possible solutions.

The recent dialogue between the Russian Federation and the United States is a welcome development that should be supported and encouraged. I remain hopeful that its outcome will be the continuation of verifiable constraints on the

world's two largest nuclear arsenals, including through the extension of the New START treaty.

Groups of countries are working together to develop initiatives to reduce nuclear risks and shore up the regime. The "Stockholm initiative" with its stepping-stones approach is one such endeavour. Then, of course, there are the practical efforts to prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons, including efforts on verification led by Norway.

I see the Review Conference itself as an opportunity – one in which to hold the frank and expert-level discussion on challenges facing the regime that is needed in order for areas of convergence to be discovered. It is also an opportunity for the States Parties to reaffirm their commitment to the Treaty and its goals, including the pursuit of a world free of nuclear weapons.

As I have consistently said during my outreach and consultations, my job as President-designate is not to prescribe what an outcome from the Review Conference should look like or include – that is entirely the prerogative of the NPT's States Parties. But it is my responsibility to facilitate an outcome that is meaningful, reflects all States Parties' interests, and is balanced across all three of the Treaty's pillars. And it would build upon and reinforce the outcomes from 1995, 2000 and 2010, including the commitments made at those Review Conferences. I also believe that the Review Conference presents an opportunity for dialogue on several areas that could produce practical ideas to strengthen implementation of each pillar in the near, medium and long-term.

First of all, there seems to be an emerging sense of convergence on the need for measures to reduce the risk of nuclear weapons being used, even if there is divergence on what those measures might be. The Review Conference could provide an opportunity to discuss such measures and find commonalities.

Second, the Review Conference is also the appropriate place for all States Parties to reaffirm their support for the IAEA and its management of the safeguards system and their commitment to ensuring that the system is supported, both politically and financially. This is especially important given the increasing worldwide expansion of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Third, the flip side of the potentially negative impacts of technology on nuclear risk and proliferation is the possible revolutionary benefits it can provide. Now is the time to reach common understandings about the impact of technology on proliferation and strategic stability, but equally importantly, on how technology can aid non-proliferation and disarmament, especially in the area of verification.

Fourth, the peaceful applications of nuclear science and technology are increasingly proving an important enabler of development, including in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Nuclear science is driving the advances in health, agriculture, water management, climate change and environmental protection that are already aiding some of the world's most vulnerable communities. There is, therefore, an opportunity to strengthen, broaden and ensure access to these technologies for all.

Finally, the Review Conference is an opportunity to listen to the voices of a diverse range of stakeholders, because a plurality of views helps produce lasting results. This means providing equitable and meaningful participation for women, space for civil society to express their views, an opportunity for industry to participate, and for the younger generations to have their say.

As I hope I have outlined, the Tenth NPT Review Conference is a venue in which the NPT States Parties can come together to address the challenges to the regime, while taking advantage of present opportunities. Producing meaningful outcomes on the issues I have raised, and the many other priorities of States Parties, will not be easy, but nor is it impossible.

It requires that undefinable, yet essential quality – political will. It needs a willingness for genuine debate and to negotiate away from rigid positions for the betterment of all countries' security.

As Saint Francis of Assisi wisely said: "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you're doing the impossible."

This should be our approach to strengthening the NPT and the regime that it upholds.

I look forward to hearing your questions, ideas and comments.

Thank you.