Regional Dialogue and Consultations on Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: Towards the PrepCom 2017

Panel I: The NPT State of Play

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At the outset I would like to express my thanks and convey the appreciation of the UN system to the hosts of this meeting, the Governments of Indonesia and Netherlands for their long-standing and steadfast commitment to nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, which we need now more than ever before.

Over the past several years, we have seen increasing divisions and stagnation in the area of global nuclear arms control and disarmament. In analysing the health of the United Nations disarmament machinery, we often pay attention mainly to three bodies – namely, the General Assembly, the Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament.

They each have very distinct roles – consensus-building, deliberative and negotiation. However, this scheme does not say it all. It is a well-established fact that the NPT review process, when it has succeeded, has essentially functioned simultaneously in all three of these roles. Some of the most important successes we have seen over the past 20 years have been agreements reached in the outcomes of NPT review conferences.

This is the reason why the NPT review process must maintain its primacy as a near-universal and consensus-based forum for advancing nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Of the nine NPT review conferences held to date, only five have produced some form of agreed outcome. The cyclical nature of this history has led some to wonder if the NPT review process runs on a boom-bust cycle. In reality, the success of the NPT review process has always been closely tied to the general situation in the field of disarmament as well as international peace and security.

The successes in 1995, when the treaty was extended indefinitely, and in 2000, when States agreed to 13 practical steps for nuclear disarmament, were due in no small part to the optimism that accompanied the end of the Cold War.
Then the unfortunate bust-boom cycle sets in. The failure in 2005 came at a time of major new conflict in the Middle East, linked to concerns over weapons of mass destruction. The success in 2010 was achieved amid hope for progress, following President Obama’s speech in Prague, the successful negotiation of New START between Russia and the United States, and the decisive actions of the international community to improve the security of vulnerable nuclear materials.

In 2015, however, the weight of the community’s growing expectations crashed against renewed trans-Atlantic tension, new strains in existing nuclear arms control instruments and slow progress or lack of it, in the implementation of past commitments, especially on the Middle East free zone.

That said, however, one thing is also very clear. Regardless of the external circumstances, no NPT review process can succeed without strong leadership. In that context, I am pleased to acknowledge among us today the presence of Ambassador Libran Cabactulan, who masterfully steered the 2010 review to its ground-breaking conclusion. In hindsight, he may have overdone it, as the success he forged could not be repeated by States parties in 2015 despite the determined efforts of Ambassador Taous Ferouki. Ambassador Cabactulan, you may have left too big shoes for your successors to fill. But leadership from the top is not enough. It must be backed by all stakeholders. In this connection, I wish to quote the words from another successful NPT President and my distinguished predecessor, Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala.

In his book “Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT” he argued that the success of the regime also depends on two additional dimensions: “(1) from the ‘bottom-up’ – that is, as manifested in domestic political sources; [and] (2) from the ‘outside-in’ – which refers to the role of international diplomacy …”

If the international community can work together with a common purpose along these two axes – from the top and bottom on one hand, and from the outside and inside on the other hand – I have no doubt that the forthcoming NPT review cycle will end in success.

I therefore wish to express appreciation for the excellent and inclusive manner in which Ambassador Henk Cor Van der Kwast has started his preparations for the first PrepCom as well, both in advance and in substance. I also wish to reiterate that he will have the entire United Nations system support behind his effort. We have developed a mutually-reinforcing division of labour with the other agencies, especially the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Lassina Zerbo, Executive Secretary of the CTBTO and I personally discussed and agreed to divide our labour to cover regional meetings in Africa by Lassina and the Asia/Pacific by me to support Ambassador van der Kwast.

We will do everything in our power to help ensure the current review cycle commences with the right tone, in order to enable States parties to pursue the inclusive
dialogue needed to find agreement on how to implement past commitments and on how to move the disarmament and non-proliferation agenda forward. Getting to our shared goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons requires inclusive engagement by all States, both the nuclear-haves and have-nots.

Distinguished delegates
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

   In many respects, the success of the current NPT review cycle will hinge on the same two issues that every Review Conference has faced since 1995.

   The first relates to the establishment of the Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction.

   All States clearly shared the same sense of frustration over the outcome in 2015, and the breakdown of our best effort to date to implement the 1995 NPT Resolution and the 2010 outcome. But, we cannot hope to see progress if we only focus on the past.

   In this spirit, I commend the positive and proactive way in which the States of the region, Middle East, have sought to move the process forward. I was pleased to participate, together with the cosponsors of the 1995 NPT Resolution, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States, in the January consultative meeting of the Committee of the Wise, established by the League of Arab States.

   I hope that the outcome of their efforts will lead to a common Arab position that is smart, adaptable and flexible. Such a position will help induce the other parties to demonstrate greater flexibility in turn.

   For my part, I believe the three co-sponsors and the UN, as co-conveners under the 2010 outcome, can be more proactive in facilitating the direct dialogue among the States of the region. That, the direct dialogue, is the starting point for the only and ultimate path to enable us to get to a Conference on establishing the zone. I can pledge that the United Nations will do whatever it can for this end. The co-conveners will be proactive, but the ultimate key is in the hands of the parties in the region, Arabs, Israel, and Iran.

   I hope all parties will step up to the plate. Simply put it, we cannot afford another repeat of 2015.

   The second issue we must address is the future of nuclear disarmament. Pressure is building. Further stagnation in efforts to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons should not be allowed to continue.

   It remains important that all sides of the debate recognize that the NPT must remain the foundation of our work to build a nuclear-weapon-free future. The NPT is our most
common denominator. But it is a delicate structure, which must be constantly nurtured against instability and unpredictability in the international system. And we must also ensure that the weight of any instrument we build on top of it does not undermine any of its three load-bearing pillars.

The NPT is not shaped like a pyramid, which has to be built in a single sequence, one layer at a time. The treaty rather provides the scaffolding for its three pillars, including for the pursuit of disarmament. This enables progress to be made in parallel on many different elements of a comprehensive regime.

Ultimately, to move forward we need to see simultaneous progress. I want to highlight the following three points.

First, the Conference on Disarmament must break its stalemate and negotiate. The pursuit of a treaty on fissile materials continues to be regarded as an indispensable step to advance nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

I welcome the recent sincere efforts and new proposals to resume work on the basis of an agreed programme of work. Yet, if the CD remains unable to negotiate, there will be increasing pressure to develop new legally binding instruments in other bodies, even in the absence of consensus among all the major stakeholders. The forthcoming negotiations on a nuclear prohibition treaty are a case in point. We need to ensure that all these efforts will proceed in a manner to complement or strengthen the NPT, not the other way around.

Second, the nuclear-weapon States need to transform their engagement with each other into a vehicle for the implementation of their past commitments. As time moves forward, cooperation on strategic arms control will require agreement at the plurilateral and multilateral levels.

A good place to start would be the completion of work on transparency, including on the items to be reported on a standard form. The 2015 Review Conference came close to agreement on this. Such reporting can facilitate future steps by providing a baseline for measuring progress. I encourage the nuclear-weapon States not wait until 2020, but rather to demonstrate this year that they are able to make progress together.

Last but not the least, the biggest nuclear arsenal possessors, including in particular, Russia and the United States, need to find a common way forward on bilateral arms control. The goals established in the New START Treaty will need to be met next year and the instrument itself is set to expire in 2021. The commencement of negotiations on the next round of reductions is already overdue.

This issue will only grow more complicated over time, unless a way is found to deal with emerging disputes relating to missile defence and compliance with existing arms control
agreements. New reductions will be the best way to prevent the current situation from spiralling into a new arms race.

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

    Preserving the NPT means maintaining its primacy as an indispensable forum for building consensus. This is why successive review conferences have recognized the treaty as a cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and an essential framework for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament. Ultimately, it is the foundation on which we can build toward a world without nuclear weapons.

    So in closing, I appeal to all States parties and other key stakeholders to begin this review cycle with a will to pursue our highest common aspirations. We have no other choice but to make the 2020 Review Conference a success. Failure to do so is not an option for the whole international community. Let us work harder to build the world and the future we want.

I thank you so much and I count on all of you.