"NPT Review Conference 2015: Lessons and Future Prospects"

Remarks to the Fifth Prague Agenda Conference

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My fellow panellists

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen

I would like to thank the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Institute of International Relations, Charles University and Metropolitan University for inviting me to participate today, and for their dedicated work in keeping the flame of the Prague Agenda burning.

In the words of Secretary-General Ban, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are not utopian ideals. They are critical to global peace and security. And few treaties have done as much to advance this cause as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – the NPT. It has been a bulwark against the further spread of nuclear weapons and the only legally binding multilateral commitment to nuclear disarmament.

Our job is to ensure that, in a rapidly changing international environment, it remains so.

The result of the 2015 Review Conference was disheartening. There is no getting around it. I am genuinely concerned that a similar result in 2020 would have a long-term impact on the Treaty’s viability. In many ways, the NPT is at a cross-roads.

The first lesson we must learn is that we cannot dwell on past disappointments. We must look forward – we must start laying the groundwork now for a successful outcome in 2020. We have less than two years before the start of the new review cycle – less than two years to re-establish a common vision.

The second lesson we must learn from 2015 is that, despite the absence of consensus, States parties remain committed to the NPT. This was very much on display at the Review Conference. States parties demonstrated compromise to achieve consensus on issues across all three of the NPT’s pillars.

In fact, what was missing was not support for the Treaty but a common understanding of how to implement commitments made under the Treaty, including at the last Review Conference. I will speak more about this in a moment.
Unfortunately, the Conference revealed an absence of common vision on both how to achieve nuclear disarmament and how to create a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and all other Weapons of Mass Destruction – the latter leading to the Conference’s failure to reach consensus.

It is these two topics on which I intend to focus today.

The 2015 Review Conference further exposed an increasing divide over the pace and scale of nuclear disarmament. There was a clear drawing of lines over States parties’ expectations and very different visions between non-nuclear weapon States and nuclear weapon States, with the former sticking with the established ‘step-by-step’ process and a vast majority of the latter urging immediate negotiations of a prohibition on nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapon convention.

There are, of course, multiple paths to nuclear disarmament, but as the Secretary-General said: What matters most is not which path is taken, but that the chosen path is headed in the right direction – toward the internationally agreed goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

This was the thrust of his Five Point Proposal, released in 2008, which suggested this could be achieved through a framework of separate, mutually reinforcing instruments or a nuclear-weapons convention, backed by a strong system of verification.

In this context, one issue on which States parties achieved consensus was on the creation of an open-ended working group to identify and elaborate effective measures for the full implementation of Article VI. At the last NPT Review Conference, a large majority of States parties expressed the view that these effective measures should be of a legal nature.

Although the working group could not be taken forward as part of a final outcome document, the First Committee of the General Assembly currently has several similar proposals in front of it.

I believe that such a forum could help us in the years ahead by providing a process through which disparate views can be voiced and, I hope, reconciled. The process would not be an end in itself, but perhaps the first steps.

I mentioned earlier, the need for States parties to implement the
commitments they have made under the Treaty. Success in 2020 will prove elusive if States parties do not implement the 64-point action plan, especially actions 3 through 5. All States parties need to work towards these outcomes, but nuclear-weapon States have a responsibility to lead – and to lead without conditions.

Since 2010, there has been some welcome progress on transparency and the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies, however, progress in other areas has been less demonstrable. The 2010 action plan was agreed by consensus and there should be no excuse for not fulfilling it.

Nuclear weapon-States need to work together to build the political will to fully realise their undertakings. Non-nuclear weapon States must support them in this endeavour.

Ladies and gentlemen

The second topic I want to speak about is the urgent need to find a common vision for a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and all other Weapons of Mass Destruction. All States parties have made an undertaking to achieve this outcome – it was instrumental to the successes of both the 1995 and 2010 Review Conferences.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly stated his readiness to support efforts to promote and sustain the inclusive regional dialogue necessary to achieve the Middle East zone.

It would be shame to throw away the progress made before the Review Conference. States must be open to compromise – or even to simply sitting around the table with one another at an experts level.

Again, if we haven’t taken steps forward on a zone by 2020, securing a successful Review Conference may be all but impossible.

Ladies and gentlemen
At the end of the day, the NPT is a bargain, all sides of which need to be upheld. It is a bargain that must be preserved and honoured – its erosion is in no one’s interest. Now is the time to narrow our differences, to develop innovative approaches and fresh ideas, and to show flexibility.

We need to act with a sense of urgency if we are to build the required political will. 2020 will mark 50 years since the NPT entered into force and there is much we need to do in the coming years to secure the future prospects of the invaluable NPT.

Thank you.