NVMP at 50: Urgent Appeal for a nuclear weapon free world – Connecting medical-humanitarian and political perspectives


Remarks by Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu
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Peace Palace, The Hague
26 November 2019
His Excellency, Foreign Minister Mr. Stef Blok,
Mr. Piet Hein Donner,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking NVMP, and Dr. Peter Buijs, for the invitation to join you. For fifty years, this organization has played a critical role in raising awareness about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons.

I take this opportunity to thank you for your tireless efforts over five decades to reduce the dangers posed by nuclear weapons, to promote research and education, and to help take us all along the path to a world free of nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, your dedication and expertise are needed now more than ever.

After more than three decades of forward movement towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, not only has that momentum ceased, but we appear to be going backwards. The only exception in the recent years is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

A combination of various factors is threatening our security today. They include fraught relations between nuclear-armed States, an increasingly complex security environment characterised by new technologies and new fault lines, the proliferation of sophisticated weapons systems – not least ballistic missiles – and the emergence of a multipolar nuclear order and regional nuclear challenges.

These factors are, inter alia, precipitating the re-emergence of dangerous rhetoric about the utility of nuclear weapons – including, alarmingly, about fighting and winning a nuclear war – that should have been consigned to history. They are fuelling a qualitative nuclear arms race based not on numbers but on competition to create faster, more accurate, stealthier and, indeed, more lethal nuclear weapons. And they are resulting in the erosion of the hard-won
disarmament and non-proliferation regime established over some fifty years of painstaking negotiation and dialogue.

International relations are now marked by the absence of trust, diminishing transparency, a preference for competition over cooperation, and a dearth of dialogue. In nuclear disarmament, gaps between States are growing over the right path to take.

In such an environment, I am worried that the barriers to the use of nuclear weapons – intentionally, by accident or through miscalculation – are lower than they’ve been since the darkest days of the Cold War.

As we approach the 2020 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or the NPT, the stakes are high. The current security context places multiple obstacles on the road to success. But I do not believe they are insurmountable. Rather, I continue to believe the Review Conference represents a unique double-headed opportunity.

First, occurring on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty’s entry into force and the twenty-fifth anniversary of its indefinite extension, the Review Conference provides a symbolic opportunity for States parties to: 1) reaffirm their commitment to the Treaty and a world free of nuclear weapons; 2) demonstrate the implementation of all obligations undertaken to attain this goal – including those made at various Review Conferences; 3) strengthen non-proliferation measures against evolving challenges; and, 4) take practical steps in nuclear disarmament.

Second, and looking beyond 2020, the Review Conference could also function as a jumping off point to consider what disarmament and non-proliferation should look like in the twenty-first century. There are growing concerns that the current environment – with all of its new variables, challenges and opportunities – requires a new vision to address the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and to chart a course to their elimination. As the cornerstone of the regime and the de facto negotiating body on these issues, the NPT is a good place to begin a reflection.
However, neither of these outcomes will happen if States do not act quickly. Three fundamental concerns need to be addressed immediately.

First, there is a need for committed leadership, especially by the nuclear-weapon States. I hope that they will be able to put aside their differences to act in accordance with the collective good.

Second, is the need for interlocutors to step forward who can engage with the different sides of current divisions and attempt to forge consensus. Successive review conferences have seen the creation of such groups. The question is, who will put their hand up now?

Finally, States parties have to think strategically about exactly what success looks like in 2020 and how to get there. Heading into April 2020, States parties will need common understandings about what could constitute an outcome from the Review Conference.

Failure to agree on a consensus outcome document in 2020 will not doom the treaty. Failure to approach the Conference ready to engage in dialogue, to recognize the legitimate concerns of others, and to work in a spirit of flexibility, could damage it.

We often talk about the need for common ground to contribute to a successful outcome. I believe that the NPT is common ground. It is recognized as an intrinsic element of our collective security and an instrument from which all States parties continue to derive significant value. Ensuring that the security and other benefits provided by the Treaty remain intact should be every States parties’ number one priority.

I look forward to working with the Government of the Netherlands, as a bureau member in 2020, to achieve this outcome.

The concept of new vision is still in its infancy. But, some of the key questions facing nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are starting to be asked by many.

For example, how can we preserve the great gains made to date while creating a framework that takes into account new challenges, such as those posed by emerging revolutionary
technologies? How can we rebuild habits of cooperation and transparency to create trust and confidence?

What will arms control look like – if further numerical reductions become more difficult, can it be based on weapon capability, such as the prohibition of particularly destabilizing weapons?

How can we ensure it addresses non-strategic nuclear weapons, as well as the long overdue issue of missiles, the primary delivery vehicle for nuclear weapons? Can it tackle the thorny issue of anti-missile systems, especially ballistic missile defence? Can it incorporate potential new developments such as hypersonic weapons or nuclear-armed drones?

These questions will take some time to answer, but what is already clear is the normative basis in which any new vision must be grounded.

It should be based in the norms of the non-use of nuclear weapons and the urgent and shared goal of their total elimination. It should strictly adhere to the principles of verifiability, irreversibility and transparency, but also accountability, compliance and enforcement.

Security concerns have to be taken into account, but so too should the understanding that disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation are key measures to prevent, mitigate and resolve conflict. They are important tools for our security. In this context, a new vision also needs to find ways to further strengthen the protection of civilians and to take into account the gendered impact of weapons.

A new vision should seek to re-establish the practice of good faith dialogue and negotiations and it should develop a common understanding of the new risks we face, especially posed by the rapid development of new technologies, and their interaction with existing concerns.

Finally, a new vision should recognize the importance of multilateral solutions. As I have said before, without the multilateral system and respect for international rules, we risk a return solely to power relations, reward-sanction mechanisms and a cycle of frozen conflicts. Today, we need a recommitment to multilateralism. We also need to ensure that our multilateral institutions are strong and nimble enough to deal with today’s challenges.
We should aspire to the vision outlined by the Secretary-General of a networked and inclusive multilateralism centered on closer cooperation with a variety of stakeholders – traditional and non-traditional – to make heard as diverse a range of voices as possible. In a multipolar world characterized by increasingly interconnected challenges, we will need to look to multi-stakeholder approaches to identify viable solutions and reinforce collective ownership.

I am pleased to note that States have already begun to come forward with their own views on these issues. In particular, I very much welcome the Netherlands’ leadership and its willingness to support creative ways to advance discussions on a new vision for disarmament.

What I have outlined will not take place over night, and there are many variables and questions remaining. However, I believe we should at least start the conversation now. I look forward to working with partners such as the Netherlands in the next couple of years of serious reflections to secure our common future.

Thank you.