

EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference
12-13 November 2020
Remarks by HE Gustavo Zlauvinen, President-designate of Tenth NPT Review
Conference

Distinguished delegates
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

At the outset, I would like to express my solidarity and sympathy with all those countries and peoples who are suffering through this terrible pandemic. We are learning many hard lessons from COVID-19, including the need to act in unison when it comes to confronting global threats.

My congratulations to the consortium for arranging another successful EU conference on disarmament and non-proliferation, under difficult circumstances. As always, you have your finger on the pulse of the most timely and important issues affecting our work.

The European Union and its Member States are among the staunchest defenders of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. Nowhere is this more the case than in the EU's support for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the NPT.

The bureau and I are most grateful for your ongoing support, and especially for the cross-regional project the EU has so generously funded to help lay the ground for a successful Tenth Review Conference. As with many other aspects of our lives, the COVID-19 pandemic has temporarily halted this project, but we remain hopeful that it will be able to resume soon.

Today, I want to address one of the key issues highlighted by this conference – the urgent need to rebuild mutual trust in arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

Albert Einstein wisely noted that, “Every kind of peaceful cooperation is primarily based on mutual trust.”

This is clearly the case for the pursuit of a world free of nuclear weapons. The absence of trust and confidence, especially between States that possess nuclear weapons, is a primary obstacle to further gains in nuclear disarmament and is accelerating arms racing dynamics, including in the deployment of new weapons. More broadly, the dearth of trust is exacerbating proliferation drivers.

It is my firm belief that the NPT and its Tenth Review Conference can play an important role in redressing this situation.

The Review Conference is a unique opportunity to facilitate dialogue, cooperation and engagement between nuclear weapon-States and non-nuclear weapon States, and amongst nuclear weapon-States. Dialogue at the Review Conference takes place at both a ministerial level and at working levels. The Conference engages policy, legal and technical experts for each of the Treaty's three pillars across the spectrum of government personnel – diplomats, uniformed and regulators. It also attracts a broad array of expertise from outside of government, including civil society, industry, scientists and academics.

It is clichéd to say that the NPT is the cornerstone of the disarmament and non-proliferation regime, but that does not make the sentiment any less true. Fifty years after its entry into force, the NPT retains its status as a pillar of international security for four reasons: It contains legally-binding disarmament commitments, including on the five nuclear-weapon States; it has credible verifiable non-proliferation obligations; it is an essential platform for the transfer of peaceful uses of nuclear science and technology; and its near-universal status means that these commitments and obligations are binding on the vast majority of the international community.

Unfortunately, the enduring nature of COVID-19 has meant that NPT States Parties have had to postpone the Review Conference for a second time, to August 2021. This is not a decision that was taken lightly, but one made in the face of a pandemic that is not abating and one that was warranted for the safety and well-being of all delegates and UN staff, and to ensure that the Review Conference can be held in such a way that meets States Parties' priorities.

Are there costs to the postponement? Of course. But as States Parties have already proven over the last seven months, they are adept at spinning adversity into advantage. Through virtual consultations, webinars, and other online events, the bureau and States Parties – supported by civil society and other stakeholders – have sought to keep the NPT on the world’s radar and maintain momentum.

As President-designate, I will continue my consultations with States Parties. To date, these have been robust conversations that dealt not only with procedural matters, but also with important issues of substance. I encourage States Parties to continue holding their own dialogues and events and devising their own initiatives to lay the ground for success when the Review Conference is held.

Cross-regional coalitions such as the Stepping stones initiative, NPDI, New Agenda Coalition or the de-alerting group are welcome endeavours that can help create broad-based support for common ground. In all of these, I believe States Parties will find willing partners in the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs and in civil society.

My point here is that, since the original postponement of the Review Conference in March, much thought has already gone into achieving success. I hope that this extension will entrench that thinking and nourish the green shoots of convergence that I have seen begin to poke their way into the sunlight.

I am not naïve. Achieving a successful outcome will be a challenge no matter when the Review Conference is held, but if this hiatus is used appropriately it can remove some of the obstacles in our path.

Strengthening the NPT and the regime it upholds is critically important at this juncture in history. One only has to glance at any media platform to see how developments around nuclear weapons are progressing.

The international security environment is fraught. All States that possess nuclear weapons are modernizing their arsenals in ways that do not just

maintain the status quo, but qualitatively improve them. The prominence of nuclear weapons in security doctrines is once again on the rise at a time when relationships between the States that possess them are in serious decline. There has been an alarming proliferation of delivery vehicles such as ballistic missiles. Technological advances have created so-called 'strategic conventional' weapons that, absent proper guardrails, have the potential to increase miscalculation.

Likewise, developments in cyber space and outer space have introduced new risks to the nuclear equation, particularly as they relate to command and control. And at the same time, regional conflicts with nuclear dimensions continue to stoke proliferation concerns.

In such an environment, without dialogue, engagement and transparency, to quote the Greek tragedian, Sophocles, "trust dies but mistrust blossoms." In such an environment, mistrust can have dangerous unintended consequences.

This is why the Tenth Review Conference presents such an important opportunity.

Any of you that have been listening to me for the last seven months will be well-acquainted with my mantra: it is not within my purview to dictate what a successful Review Conference looks like. That is entirely the terrain of NPT States Parties. It is, however, my responsibility to endeavour to facilitate an outcome that is balanced across all three of the Treaty's pillars – disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful uses – and that strengthens the NPT and the regime of which it is the centrepiece.

Rebuilding mutual trust and confidence among States Parties will benefit the Treaty and the broader regime.

There are five overarching ways in which I believe the Review Conference can help rebuild mutual trust.

First, all States Parties can reaffirm their commitment to the NPT and its goals.

Second, all States Parties should demonstrate implementation of commitments and obligations undertaken as parties to the Treaty – including those undertaken at previous Review Conferences. A practical way to do so,

and one already utilized by many States Parties, is through the submission of national reports.

Third, all States Parties should approach the Review Conference with a willingness to genuinely negotiate. I appreciate the stakes are high, given the national security implications, but I encourage States Parties to avoid rigid adherence to calcified positions for the duration of the Conference. Trust can be built through a willingness to engage with other views, no matter how divergent they may be.

Fourth, States Parties should listen to the voices of a diverse range of stakeholders, because a plurality of views helps create an environment conducive to the dialogue that seeds trust. 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.

Fifth and finally, a balanced approach is essential to building trust. States Parties need assurance that commitments and obligations will be honoured across disarmament, non-proliferation and peaceful uses.

There are, of course, numerous actions that States Parties can undertake beneath each pillar of the NPT in order to rebuild mutual trust.

For example, under Pillar 1, the nuclear-weapon States should continue to improve transparency around their doctrines and arsenals. Transparency builds confidence and confidence, in turn, builds trust. Also, States Parties could engage in dialogue on common understandings about the impact of technology on proliferation and strategic stability. As a third example, and in service of the old adage “trust but verify”, States Parties could establish how to take further steps in nuclear disarmament verification that strengthen all States’ security.

Under Pillar 2, the verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency of the NPT’s safeguards system and the trust that it engenders is a central enabler of the Treaty. Ensuring a system that is able to properly carry out its responsibilities should be of the highest priority for States Parties. As adoption of nuclear power and non-power applications increases worldwide, it is essential that States Parties demand that all newcomers adopt appropriate levels of safeguards, as well as safety and security.

In the past, Pillar 3, which facilitates access to nuclear science, technology and energy, has often been taken for granted, if not overlooked. This cannot be the mentality States Parties take into the Tenth Review Conference. It dismisses the crucial role Pillar 3 has played in building support for disarmament and non-proliferation, but more importantly, it fails to take into account the increasingly prominent role the peaceful use of nuclear science and technology plays in improving the daily lives of communities all over the world.

Facilitated by the IAEA, nuclear science is driving fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals in health, agriculture and water management, climate change and environmental protection. In giving Pillar 3 its proper appreciation, the Review Conference can build trust that the interests of all States Parties are being accounted for.

The re-establishment of mutual trust is a goal to which the NPT and its Review Conference can contribute, but it is clearly also something from which the Treaty can benefit. Trust and confidence will strengthen implementation of the NPT and, by extension, the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

In today's uncertain environment, this is a goal we should all be striving for.

Thank you.