Mr Chairman,

The following are my reflections, offered in a personal capacity, on the informal panel discussion I moderated on 16 May under the broader title of “Taking Stock” and the sub-title “Towards a world free of nuclear weapons”.

The panel discussion provided a useful discussion on the nature of nuclear-weapons-free zones, the positive role zones have played and continue to play, and some of their challenges. Looking ahead, there was also focus on the potential of zones (and elsewhere the nuclear-weapons-free status of certain States) in galvanising further efforts toward the elimination of nuclear weapons.

One of the panellists, Ms Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, Senior Research Associate at the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies, summed up the situation well by suggesting that zones were a feel-good story but with some caveats and challenges. The clearest feel-good elements were their practical effect in limiting where nuclear weapons could be stationed and developed, as well as placing limitations on nuclear umbrellas within relevant zones. Various obligations of zone treaties extended the scope of the NPT (such as prohibitions against dumping of radioactive wastes) or addressed perceived ambiguities with existing obligations (such as the question of stationing under NPT Article I.)

Among caveats expressed and questions raised were whether in the short term, zones had reached their physical limit. Proposals (of significantly varying degrees of current activity) for zones in the Middle East, the Arctic, North-East Asia and South Asia remained proposals. Some expressed concern about the perceived difficulty of extracting NSAs from the NPT nuclear-weapons States through zones. A couple of interveners also questioned the historic role of zones as disarmament measures in the strictest sense of that term, as opposed to non-proliferation measures.

However, on the first two issues, a number of interventions reflected the broad view that the positive historical and contemporary record of zones were such that further zones could make a significant contribution to advancing efforts regionally or globally toward a world without nuclear weapons and that the relationship between zones and the NPT nuclear-weapon States remained an important element in the development of existing zones.
On that last point, the historical reflections of the two panellists – Ambassador Gioconda Ubeda, Secretary-General of OPANAL and Ms Mukhatzhanova – as well as those of other participants on the political contexts in which certain zone treaties were developed highlighted a different perspective. As well as reinforcing NPT obligations and variously moving beyond the scope of the NPT within a framework of good neighbourliness, the development of some zones had been specifically driven by disarmament concerns of relevant regions. Moreover, in all existing zones, nuclear-weapons programs had been actively considered or in some cases even initiated.

The point I took from this part of the discussion was not semantic. If we consign zones merely to non-proliferation concepts in either an historical or a contemporary context, there is a risk that we might curtail their potential as vehicles for future disarmament. I think it was clear from Ambassador Ubeda’s interventions this driving notion of a regional community galvanised over time, focused on a collective disarmament goal, regional as well as international in its ambition, and consciously creating something which is part of a linked-up global security architecture.

This notion of linking up, of bridging was highlighted throughout the discussion. A number of those who intervened recognised that the differences in obligations and institutional arrangements between zones created the problems for coalescence of efforts. But there was not a sense that this was insurmountable. Some recalled the meetings of zones and Mongolia which coincide with NPT Review Conferences and asked whether more could be made of those meetings. Some also asked whether States within particular zones should collaborate more closely during NPT meetings themselves. Other ideas for enhancing cooperation and collaboration between relevant regions included creating similar institutions within zones and having countries such as Mongolia and those with relevant constitutional laws (such as Austria) more actively seek their own bridge-building efforts.

Mr Chairman,

This is a good point to end. In respect taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, I think it would be useful if the open-ended working group could consider the value and means of further enhancing and exploiting substantive cooperation and collaboration between existing zones. The positive practical effect of zones is being realised regionally; their potential for positive political effect globally could still be realised and recommendations pointing in that direction might be of use.

I thank you, Mr Chairman.