OPENING REMARKS BY OEWG CHAIR, AMBASSADOR BURHAN GAFOOR, PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE TO THE UNITED NATIONS, AT THE FIRST SUBSTANTIVE SESSION OF THE OEWG, 13 DECEMBER 2021

I will now make some opening remarks as Chair.

2 I would like to start by saying that I am deeply honoured and humbled to have been elected Chair of this OEWG. It is a big responsibility, and I thank all Member States for placing their trust in me.

3 As in any inter-governmental process at the UN, the success of this OEWG and the direction and pace of progress will be determined by Member States. This is ultimately your process, and as your Chair, I will do my best to facilitate your discussions. I will listen carefully and be guided by the views of all members on all the issues as set out in the mandate of the OEWG, as contained in resolution 75/240 and the agenda (A/AC.292/2021/1) that we adopted at our organizational session.

4 I know that delegations have different views, but I believe we all share a common objective, which is to achieve an open, secure, stable, accessible, and peaceful ICT environment. It is my hope that this common objective will bring members together to find common ground. As the Chair, I will be a neutral and objective facilitator and I will do my best to bridge differences, build convergence and find consensus solutions. I am committed to an open, inclusive, and transparent process and my doors will be always be open to any delegation that wishes to meet with me at any point in this process.

5 As we begin our first substantive session, I would like to share with you some of my reflections on the OEWG process.

6 First, we are beginning the first substantive session in a context of continued challenges in the ICT environment from the perspective of international security. As the UN Secretary-General noted in his report entitled “Our Common Agenda”, the risks to peace and security are growing as new technologies are placing the capacity to disrupt global stability in the hands of far more actors. The report of the previous OEWG noted that there has been a continuing increase in incidents involving the malicious use of ICTs by both State and non-State actors, including terrorists and criminal groups. That report further highlighted that some non-State actors have even demonstrated ICT capabilities previously only available to States. Almost every day, we see media reports of new cyber incidents around the world involving the malicious use of ICTs. These
are worrying developments and they show that the work of the OEWG continues to be relevant and much needed. Although the international ICT environment is challenging and the views of member states are diverse, I believe there is strong political will and commitment among all Member States to address the malicious use of ICTs. This gives me some hope that we can build on what we have already achieved and make further progress within the OEWG process.

7 Second, as all of you know, the mandate of this OEWG spans a period of five years, which is different from the previous OEWG. The length of this mandate gives us additional opportunities as well as responsibilities. With a five-year mandate, we can, and we must take a longer-term view. In the next five years, the threat landscape will continue to evolve and so will technologies. It is therefore necessary to consolidate our foundation, strengthen the implementation of what we have already agreed and begin to address new issues and anticipate new challenges that will arise over the next few years. Although a five-year time frame gives us more time than the previous OEWG, we cannot afford to be complacent. It is important for the OEWG to make progress and show some early results, in small, incremental steps. It may be tempting to wait for five years before we make any decision. However, such an approach will not be credible, especially with the growing risks to international security posed by cyber threats and incidents.

8 Third, the OEWG is the only democratic, universal, and transparent forum that we have at the UN at this moment to discuss developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security. There is great value to an inclusive process like the OEWG because it allows all Member States to have their voices heard on an important issue. And precisely because the OEWG is an inclusive process, it has the potential to be a platform for building trust and confidence, for building common understanding and for strengthening cooperation at the global level. However, whether the OEWG can fulfil its potential depends on whether all Member States are willing, and able, to work together, in a spirit of mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual understanding.

9 Fourth, as I said at our Organisational Session in June, and I echo what was just said by Her Excellency Izumi Nakamitsu, we are not starting from scratch. We have a strong foundation to build upon. The issue of information and telecommunications in the context of international security has been on the UN agenda since 1998. We now have an initial framework of norms, rules, and principles for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace that has been endorsed by UN General Assembly resolutions. This year, we achieved significant outcomes, namely the consensus adoption of the OEWG report in March 2021 and the GGE report in May 2021. This was followed by the consensus adoption
in the First Committee and General Assembly of resolution 76/19 which was jointly tabled by the United States and the Russian Federation. These are very positive developments, and they bode well for our work in the OEWG. However, our past successes do not guarantee the future success of our work in this OEWG. We need to continue our work patiently, by building on the foundation that we already have. We need to patiently build consensus, issue by issue, piece by piece. There is no shortcut to building consensus except through listening, understanding and some give and take. And most importantly, we need to move forward as a working group and avoid sliding backward.

10 Fifth, the OEWG itself is an important confidence-building measure. The OEWG gives all Member States a platform to talk to each other, understand each other and further increase the levels of trust and confidence. We have achieved much this year, by talking directly with each other and making good faith efforts to understand our differences. But this state of affairs is not to be taken for granted. I would strongly encourage delegations to continue to reach out and talk to other delegations, especially to delegations that have a different view. If we want to build consensus, we need to start by building bridges. While it is important to talk to each other, talking alone is not enough. We need to walk the talk and demonstrate that the OEWG can deliver results.

11 This leads me to my sixth point – that the OEWG cannot just be a talk-shop with no results to show. Many countries, especially the smaller countries, are looking to the OEWG to deliver concrete outcomes, in terms of support and capacity building. The OEWG must therefore be a platform for action, collaboration, and implementation – it must be a place where we can achieve concrete results. As I said earlier, it is important for the OEWG to take small incremental steps and demonstrate its value by showing some early progress. If the OEWG is not able to show early progress, for example in the area of capacity building, many delegations will lose interest in the process. And if we are not able to deliver outcomes, we will not be able to build trust and confidence in each other.

12 The good news is that we are starting this process from a good position. We have a strong foundation in the form of an initial framework of norms, rules, and principles for responsible state behaviour. However, this framework cannot just exist on paper; it must be made into a practical reality by giving all Member States the support and capacity building assistance needed to implement the framework. That is why it is important to make early progress, especially on the issue of capacity building. Capacity building is not an end in itself but rather a cross-cutting issue in our overall framework. There is no better way to build confidence and mutual trust in our framework than by giving all Member States
the capacity to put it into practice through active participation in CBMs, norms implementation and policy development.

13 My seventh and last point is that it is important for the OEWG process to have meaningful and substantive engagement with stakeholders. The reality is that only a small proportion of cyberspace is managed by state actors, so it is crucial that any discussion on cyber issues requires the active involvement and input of stakeholders. As Chair of the OEWG, I remain committed to engaging with stakeholders in a systematic, sustained, and substantive manner. In the last few months, I have had the chance to meet with many stakeholders and I appreciate and welcome their willingness to engage with me. I know that many stakeholders are excited about the OEWG process and they are ready to contribute by sharing their ideas, expertise as well as their resources to achieve meaningful outcomes in the OEWG process. It is my hope that we can find a consensual solution to defining modalities for the participation of stakeholders, which remains a pending organisational issue and which we will address shortly.

14 Let me conclude with an African saying that is often repeated here at the UN, which is as follows: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” There is no doubt that the challenge we are facing requires us to go far and to do that successfully, there is no doubt that we need to work together. As the Chair, I am hopeful that we can go far and achieve good outcomes from this OEWG process. We have already achieved some important outcomes this year, we already have a good foundation of norms, rules and principles and there seems to be strong political commitment to continue discussing the issue of cyber security at the UN. There is therefore no reason why we cannot go far, especially if we put our minds to it and work together over the next five years, in a spirit of mutual trust and mutual confidence.

15 I thank you.