Letter dated 25 April 1977 from the Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In accordance with paragraph 3 of resolution 31/139 B adopted by the General Assembly at its thirty-first regular session, I have the honour to communicate to you the views of the French Government on the agenda and all other relevant questions relating to the special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament.
In paragraph 3 of its resolution 31/189 B, the United Nations General Assembly invited Member States to communicate to the Secretary-General their views on the agenda and all other relevant questions relating to the special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament.

The French Government wishes to stress the following points.

1. France welcomes the decision taken at the thirty-first session of the United Nations General Assembly to hold a special session devoted to disarmament. For very many years, the representatives of France who have had occasion at successive sessions of the General Assembly to deal with the problems of disarmament have continually stressed the inadequacy of the progress made. The French Government simply wishes to recall the views which it put forward in its reply sent to the Secretary-General on the strengthening of the role of the United Nations in the field of disarmament (document A/AC.181/1/Add.3 of 7 June 1976). In France’s view, the decision adopted shows that the United Nations realizes the need, in an effort of profound reflection, to make a detailed study of ways and means of advancing the disarmament endeavour. The difficulty of this task should not be underestimated, and it can be attempted only on the basis of respect for a certain number of general principles.

2. All States in the world will attend the special session in order to discuss problems which concern them all immediately and directly; concepts as important as their defence, their security and hence their national independence will be involved. France therefore considers it essential that, starting with the preparatory phase, each State — whether or not it is a member of the Preparatory Committee — should be permitted to state its views and make any suggestions which it may consider relevant, without any constraints or restrictions of any kind. During the discussion at the thirty-first session, the French Government had supported the idea of a Preparatory Committee open to all States; its view did not prevail. The Preparatory Committee should at least evolve without delay methods and procedures which will enable States not members of the Committee to make known their views, opinions and suggestions.

The Povners with the greatest military strength — and in particular the nuclear Powers — which bear a large share of the responsibility for the continuing acceleration of the arms race, must necessarily play a leading role in disarmament; without their active co-operation, any effort may be in vain. However, since the special session is an international forum for discussion and not for the negotiation of disarmament conventions, this responsibility should not be reflected in special privileges.

3. Just as all States should be able to participate in the special session on an equal footing, so it appears essential to the French Government that no subject should be barred from the discussion a priori. All questions of substance, procedure or organization concerning disarmament should be legitimately admissible. No subject should be taboo.

On the other hand, the United Nations should refrain from any discussion of
subjects which are outside the topic of disarmament or have only tenuous links with that topic. Similarly, it should not interfere in the bilateral or multilateral negotiations in progress.

Lastly, it seems inappropriate to try to determine in advance the lines to be followed by the session itself. For example, the Assembly will have to decide on its relationship to a future World Disarmament Conference. All options should remain open, and the decisions to be taken or not taken by the special session in this regard should not be prejudged.

4. The forthcoming special session should attempt to open up new avenues leading to disarmament, and it should therefore not be a simple repetition of the discussions held each year in the First Committee of the General Assembly. This would be the case if the agenda of the session were to include the same items as are dealt with each year during the annual debates. New approaches appear essential, and the French Government reserves the right to make suggestions to this end, should the circumstances appear propitious.

5. France is not a priori opposed to a study being made of the possibility of a "political declaration of principle" on the subject of disarmament. However, a general text of this kind can have only a limited scope and an essentially academic importance; it is not desirable that it should become the sole focus of the Assembly's attention. More specific objectives should be sought.

In this connexion, one task which could usefully be performed by the Assembly would be a study of a number of major general problems in specialized committees: reduction of nuclear armaments, prohibition of the manufacture of certain types of weapon such as chemical weapons, conditions for the application of international verification and control procedures, improvement of the procedures of the United Nations and related bodies, etc. The aim of this study should be not to evolve solutions or to try to draft conventions but to determine the conditions which would permit the attainment of these objectives by identifying the political or technical obstacles preventing their achievement and by making realistic an evaluation as possible of the chances of success.

In the light of this evaluation, the Assembly would be in a position to set priorities, to determine interim objectives, if necessary, and to establish the necessary correlations between the various aspects of disarmament, so that progress may be resumed towards the ultimate objective of general and complete disarmament under effective international control, which must remain and be reaffirmed as the essential goal of our efforts.

6. The French Government considers it desirable that the Assembly should at its special session attempt to reach generally acceptable consensuses on the questions to be considered. A decision on the subject of disarmament which does not enjoy the approval of a very large majority and does not command the support of the principal countries which may have to implement it will remain without effect and may even have adverse effects.