Note verbale dated 25 April 1977 from the Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General.

The Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations presents his compliments to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and, in respect of the terms of paragraph 2 of General Assembly resolution 31/189 B whereby an invitation is extended to Member States to convey to the Secretary-General views on the agenda and all other relevant questions relating to the special session on disarmament, has the honour to convey the attached comments to the Secretary-General.
Comments of the Government of Australia on the agenda for the special session on disarmament and related matters

The promotion of measures to achieve the reduction or control of nuclear and conventional armaments is directly related to the maintenance of international peace and security and to the prospects for maintaining a viable international order. The convening of a special session of the General Assembly on disarmament is a reflection of the sense of urgency felt by many countries that arms control measures should demand the increasing attention of the international community. Australia shares this concern, which is why it co-sponsored resolution 31/189 B and is playing an active role in the Preparatory Committee for the special session.

General comments

The goal of arms limitation has been an elusive one. While there have been a number of notable achievements – for example, the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – over-all progress has been slow and limited. Universal acceptance of those agreements that have been successfully negotiated has been difficult to secure. The continued growth of military expenditures and levels of armaments is, however, to an important extent a reflection of the continuing uncertainties and instabilities in an international situation which has been subject to far-reaching changes and tensions over the last 30 years. Governments have therefore remained heavily preoccupied with real and perceived threats to their security. It is nevertheless true that some countries have developed their military forces and armaments beyond the levels required for defensive purposes.

Moreover, since the Second World War, the world has witnessed a tremendous growth in the sophistication of military technology and weaponry at both the nuclear and conventional levels. This ongoing revolution has added greatly to the complexities of arms control, has sometimes threatened the limited progress already accomplished and on occasion has stimulated wasteful and threatening arms races.

These considerations have direct relevance for the manner in which the international community approaches arms limitation. There is a need to establish what limitations should seek to achieve and what can be realistically accomplished. The principle of general and complete disarmament will remain the ultimate objective, but it is not a realistic goal in the time-span which should be encompassed by current efforts. Nations will for the foreseeable future, continue to maintain military forces and must have a reasonable capacity to ensure their self-defence. In these circumstances, the more immediate objective of arms control should be to assure greater stability in international relations and to minimize the risk of conflict.

Controlling the growth of armaments must be related to the underlying sources of insecurity and conflict which create the demand for weapons. Whether carried out
in a bilateral or multilateral context, the regulation of weaponry needs to be
directed to the elimination, or at least the alleviation, of actual or potential
destabilizing situations as represented, for example, by the proliferation of
nuclear weapons. Arms control efforts should also recognize, inter alia, the
importance of strictly defensive postures and of military balances, the role of
deterrence in preventing conflict, the limitation of damage and lessening the
risks to civilians should conflict occur.

Enunciation of principles

Australia considers that one of the principal tasks confronting the special
session should be a discussion of the kind of principles suggested above with the
end in mind of seeking to secure a realistic conceptual framework within which
arms control issues are approached and negotiations conducted. This could be
combined with an objective review of past negotiations and statements of principle
and an appraisal of the current situation in regard to arms control measures. The
results of this consideration might be incorporated in a declaration of principles
to be adopted by the special session. Australia believes that effective
conclusions in this area would make a major contribution to the clarification of
arms control objectives.

Establishment of priorities

A second major goal of the special session should be the identification of
particular areas of arms limitation where action is required or desirable and the
establishment of priorities for future negotiations. Australia does not consider
that it would be practical for the session to attempt to negotiate any specific
arms control measures. The time available will be short. Moreover, important
negotiations are being conducted in other forums and in bilateral and regional
contexts, which should not be prejudiced. There may also be difficulties in
seeking to establish a firm time-table for negotiations on disarmament priorities.
While urgency is enjoined by the importance of achieving further arms limitation
measures, progress on many issues will be largely dependent on the resolution of
problems between the major Powers, which will not be advanced by the setting of
artificial time-limits or frames. Australia believes that the setting of
priorities by the session will be a satisfactory catalyst in promoting meaningful
negotiations in particular areas of concern to the international community.

Of all arms control issues, those concerning nuclear weapons have rightly been
at the centre of international efforts. It will be incumbent on the special
session to give major attention to nuclear issues. Australia has many times
reiterated that there are three fundamental areas of nuclear arms control where it
looks for early progress: first, the strengthening of measures to prevent the
proliferation of nuclear weapons; second, the termination of nuclear weapons
testing in all environments; and third, further progress in the strategic arms
limitation talks between the United States and the Soviet Union.

All three areas involve complex political and technical considerations, the
detail of which will be best left to the expert forums that are dealing with them.

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The special session might rather address itself to basic principles and guidelines that are likely to promote the goal of nuclear arms control. For example, it might wish to endorse the essential elements of an effective comprehensive test ban treaty and how early agreement can best be facilitated. Or it might wish to give attention to the international obligations of the major nuclear-weapons Powers to curb their strategic arsenals and to particular areas and aspects of strategic arms control which, while enormously complex, would have to be confronted if substantial and balanced reductions are to be achieved.

It is to be hoped that before the special session convenes efforts to curb the nuclear arms race will have gained sufficient impetus for at least equal attention to be given to the need for parallel advances in the quest for a strengthened régime against the spread of nuclear weapons to additional countries. Australia's commitment to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty is well known. The special session should seek to promote the view that "horizontal" non-proliferation is an objective to which all States should subscribe and that all have obligations and responsibilities in furthering that objective. The non-proliferation question raises many important issues, in particular in regard to controls and safeguards on the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, which are now being extensively discussed in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and other contexts. The special session might seek to address the basis on which an effective non-proliferation régime can be built. For example, in addition to the clear need for strengthened safeguards and controls on nuclear materials, equipment and technology, such a régime should hold out incentives for co-operation and ensure that self-denial of a weapons option will not inhibit a country's wish to develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes. There must also be adequate security assurances for non-nuclear-weapon States.

With regard to the regulation of conventional armsments, the special session might wish to address itself to whether a conceptual framework can be identified. A number of approaches to arms control which have been suggested include: curbing the development of new weapons, prohibiting or restricting certain weapons which may be indiscriminate or cause unnecessary suffering; reductions of military budgets; and the possibilities of regional states taking the initiative in promoting regional arms control proposals. Stemming from consideration of such approaches, the session might seek to establish certain priorities for meaningful negotiations on particular areas of conventional arms control or particular categories of weaponry.

Another field to which the session might give attention is that of the strengthening of international security and the relaxation of tensions by "confidence-building" measures. Matters such as better communications between States in potentially hostile situations and prior notification of major military manoeuvres or movements and weapons testing could be considered here.
Review of disarmament machinery

The third principal area which should be dealt with by the special session is that of a review of the international disarmament negotiating machinery. The disarmament machinery of the United Nations has undergone an evolutionary process over the years; the present bodies have developed an expertise which could be lost in any restructuring process that does not adequately take into account the many intricate factors that have of necessity influenced the nature of the present machinery. Moreover, no single negotiating body can or should fulfil the objective of arriving at specific arms control agreements. Indeed, it is Australia's view that the basis for many such agreements can only be negotiated directly between the States concerned. Australia recognizes the need for a smaller negotiating body reporting to the General Assembly, such as the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament, to assist in the negotiation of specific multilateral agreements. To function effectively, however, such a body must be so constituted and of such a size as to reflect a proper diversity of interests and must enjoy the total confidence of all members of the international community, including all the nuclear weapon States. Australia also recognizes that on occasion other bodies of either a standing or an ad hoc nature may be more appropriate to deal with specific issues. It is hoped that the special session will reach an appropriate consensus if it is agreed that there is a need to restructure the international disarmament negotiating machinery.

Organizational matters

With regard to the organization of the special session, Australia believes that it will be necessary to establish a committee structure to make the most effective use of time. This structure could correspond with the three main areas of possible action identified by Australia: (a) examination of fundamental principles of arms control and preparation of a declaration embodying these; (b) establishment of priorities; and (c) review of the international disarmament negotiating machinery. The plenary of the session could then be utilized for a general debate and for consideration of the reports of the committees.

Australia considers that, to the maximum extent possible, decisions of the session should be taken by consensus. Realism should be the keynote of the meeting which dictates against the use of voting majorities to impose decisions which may be unacceptable to significant minorities and thus unlikely to advance the cause of arms control.

In short, the special session can be a major milestone in an effort to promote more meaningful negotiations on a variety of arms limitation questions and thus to enhance international peace and security. To achieve this, however, all countries must be prepared to approach the meeting in a constructive manner, free from polemics and from attempts to apportion blame for past failures and to impose unreasonable panacea.