Thirty-sixth session
FIRST COMMITTEE
Agenda item 55

GENERAL AND COMPLETE DISARMAMENT

Letter dated 23 November 1981 from the Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a Working Paper of the Austrian Government concerning measures to improve the reliability and objectivity of information in the military area.

I would kindly request that this Working Paper be circulated as an official document of the First Committee of the General Assembly under agenda item 55.

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Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations
Measures to Improve the Reliability and Objectivity of Information in the Military Area

(1) In the present situation characterized by rising tensions, the acceleration of the arms race and the stagnation of disarmament efforts all approaches need to be explored which could lead to a reversal of these dangerous trends. In many cases inadequate information has been the basis for misjudgement and misperception of a military situation among States. This paper is presented out of the conviction that measures can be found that could greatly diminish the suspicion and fear burdening relations between States and thereby help to slow down the arms race. While such measures cannot be regarded as a substitute for disarmament agreements they can through the building of confidence greatly facilitate disarmament negotiations.

(2) Under the conditions of the existing international system national security is still primarily defined in military terms. While the growing economic interdependence of States has underlined the steadily increasing importance of non-military factors, the basic security concern remains to this day the defence against a foreign military attack. The character of the measures taken by a State to ensure its ability to deter or repel such an attack and the amount of resources devoted to this purpose depend among other things on the assessment of the intentions and capabilities of other nations. The intentions are deduced from the broad range of relations between the States concerned, from historical experience, present behaviour and perceived future interests. If there exists already a measure of mistrust toward a State, its military capabilities are an equally important indicator of its intentions. Their assessment is often hampered by an unwillingness to make relevant information public.

(3) Because of the inadequacy of reliable information national assessments of the military strength and intentions of others are often incorrect. As these assessments are of vital importance for national security there is a natural tendency to overestimate rather than underestimate an adversary's military capabilities. To minimize the risk of being taken by surprise Governments frequently initiate arms-programs on the basis of "worst-case" estimates. Similarly the worst possible intention is often assumed at every move of an opponent. The negative consequences of this syndrome of inadequacy of information, insecurity, mistrust and overreaction are multiplied as it is mirrored by the same behaviour on the side of the adversary. The "worst-case" scenarios become self-fulfilling prophecies as the armament measures, which were based on them, lead in an action-reaction pattern to the acceleration of the arms race and the exacerbation of international tensions.

(4) The pattern of State behaviour just outlined was a driving element in arms races throughout history. Today the stakes are infinitely higher. The lack of reliable and accurate reciprocal assessments of military capabilities was a decisive factor in the development which led to the production of more than 50,000 nuclear weapons with an accumulative explosive power sufficient to kill the whole of mankind several times over. It continues to be a major cause of the qualitative arms race and is one of the key factors in the emergence of regional arms races which in view of the growing interlinkage of regional crises also threaten global security.

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(5) Inadequate information is finally one of the main obstacles to efforts to bring the arms race under control. Militarily significant agreements on the limitation or reduction of weapons and forces presuppose a common understanding about the existing balance of the respective weapons and forces, which is extremely difficult to obtain when there is no reliable information available. The establishment of an agreed data base for the strategic nuclear weapons of the super-Powers is one of the major achievements of the SALT-process. It could be reached in an area where "national means" (i.e. satellites) can obtain highly accurate and reliable data. Where these conditions do not exist even long and painstaking negotiations often do not produce tangible results. The Vienna talks on Mutual Reductions of Forces, Armaments and Associated Measures in Central Europe are ample evidence for this fact. In situations where little or no information is obtainable Governments are usually reluctant even to enter into arms control negotiations.

(6) Uncertainty in the field of information and one-sided interpretation of the question of a military balance have often proved detrimental for any success in disarmament. Both are major elements of the present state of insecurity in international relations. Efforts to increase the flow of information and to enhance its reliability and objectivity are therefore a promising approach to improve the situation. The past decades have brought important innovations in the techniques for the gathering and the dissemination of information and further development and wider application of statistical methods. The great potential of these accomplishments for the improvement of the flow of information on the military activities and capabilities of States has not been sufficiently explored so far, but there exist a number of promising initiatives in this area:

The elaboration of a standardized reporting instrument for military expenditures was an important step forward in this context. If this reporting system is further refined and implemented with a broader participation it could greatly increase the information available on the level of resources devoted by States to military purposes and thereby eliminate a major source of misconceptions and mistrust.

The establishment of an International Satellite Monitoring Agency could also constitute a valuable measure to provide objective information on military matters. Apart from its functions in the verification of compliance with arms control and disarmament agreements the Agency could monitor military activities of States in areas of tension and thereby contribute to the settlement of international crises. It could also be entrusted with other missions designed to build confidence through the dissemination of reliable information on the military potential of States.

Other important proposals to reduce misunderstandings and faulty estimates of military strength are contained in the Study on Confidence-Building Measures.

(7) All these and other initiatives and proposals in this area merit careful consideration. Wherever possible, appropriate action should be taken. Austria believes that a process should be established aimed at gradually enhancing the quantity and quality of information in the military field.

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(8) Apart from steps designed to promote a higher degree of openness in the military area measures should also be included aimed at establishing objective mechanisms for the assessment of military situations. Austria believes that an evaluation by independent organs could in specific situations contribute to defusing international tensions and strengthen security. An objective evaluation of the military situation based on the consent and the co-operation of all States concerned could build confidence, promote the peace process and pave the way for arms limitation measures. Such mechanisms could be usefully employed on a regional, interregional or global level to establish an objective data base concerning specific types of weapon systems and military forces as a step toward disarmament agreements. The institutional arrangements for such mechanisms need to be carefully elaborated according to the special conditions and requirements of the respective area of application. The United Nations would have a leading role to play in this context. The Security Council and the General Assembly could adopt decisions concerning the development and application of such measures. The experience gained with fact-finding methods and study groups could provide valuable guidance for the setting up of such mechanisms.

(9) Austria hopes that the forthcoming Second Special Session on Disarmament will devote particular attention to the promotion of openness and objectivity in the military area. The basic objective of all such efforts is particularly well formulated in paragraph 44 of the Study on Confidence-Building Measures:

"Rationality and stability in international relations as main characteristics of the confidence-building process will be greatly enhanced if subjective factors which may account for misconceptions and, in any event, are subject to sudden changes are in the long run replaced by objective elements; in other words: if speculation is superseded by knowledge."