Opening Statement

By

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen. I welcome this opportunity to address the Committee and to greet its members, both new and returning.

It is my honour to congratulate your Chairperson on his appointment to guide our work. Ambassador Rattray’s long diplomatic experience will serve the Committee well. I also wish to recognize the members of the Bureau and to assure them and all delegations of the fullest cooperation of the Office for Disarmament Affairs during the Committee’s work.

Today, October seventh, marks the 70th anniversary of the conclusion of the Dumbarton Oaks conference, which drafted what would later become the UN Charter. It is fitting to mention this as the Committee opens its 2014 session because included in that draft was language addressing both disarmament and the regulation of armaments. These goals have since become part of the identity of the UN as an institution.

As one looks at this Committee’s agenda, we can see that virtually all our work is still focused on these primary aims: the elimination of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biological and chemical) and the limitation, reduction, and regulation of conventional arms. Considered together, these form the integrated concept of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”, which has long been the world community’s “ultimate objective”—and a goal found in a dozen multilateral treaties.

The UN can certainly not be blamed for being fickle about its primary disarmament goals. Yet there is a secondary theme that has characterized this organization’s work, namely the frequency of disagreements over the means to achieve these goals—disagreements that have often immobilized the disarmament machinery, and not just this Committee.

In the face of such disagreements, Member States have proposed various ways of “revitalizing” this machinery, a term found even in the Final Document of the General Assembly’s first special session on disarmament back in 1978. Many delegations are also aware that this year marks the tenth anniversary of General Assembly resolution 59/95, to improve the effectiveness of the Committee’s methods of work—a familiar theme indeed.

It is ironic that the need to revitalize the machinery has become—along with disarmament itself—a hardy perennial in the General Assembly and remains so today.

Of course there have been exceptions when the machinery was able to produce concrete substantive results. This was apparent in the overwhelming support for the negotiation and adoption of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, and the Arms Trade Treaty, which already has 118 signatories just a year after it was adopted by the General Assembly. And to those who believe that progress in arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament is impossible in times of ongoing disputes, especially between the Great Powers, they need only recall the number of treaties in these fields that were concluded precisely during such unsettled times.

Is it conceivable that this might be the year when the impasse in the disarmament machinery will finally show some signs of yielding? Even if this possibility might be modest, we must not fail to pursue any option that could move this machinery forward. One such opportunity has been presented by advocates of a “step-by-step approach” to disarmament—it might well be time to consider some possible variations of that approach.
The starting point must be a recognition that our collective mission here is not in achieving progress towards disarmament. Our mission is instead progress in disarmament.

The former approach consists of an open-ended list of conditions that must be taken before actual disarmament activities can later be undertaken, an approach often applied to nuclear disarmament. Advocacy of this approach has neither served to build a consensus nor to revitalize the work of this Committee. Quite the opposite, it has contributed to the chronic impasse and will likely continue to do so unless an alternative path is taken.

A more auspicious course would be to pursue a different kind of step-by-step approach, one focused on implementing disarmament commitments. The resolutions adopted by this Committee offer a superb means to identify clearly the interim or proximate goals to guide the disarmament process. I am speaking here of a new “metrics of disarmament” consisting of specific indicators for measuring progress in implementing commitments. In short, the resolutions would place a greater emphasis on operationalizing the goals of disarmament, by identifying observable measures such as reductions in stockpiles, delivery systems, weapons materials, volumes of arms produced or exported, and reductions in military expenditures. This might be called “results-based” disarmament.

The value of this approach is in its close connection to the disarmament mandate of this Committee. Our purpose here should not be just to reaffirm annually long-term goals or to stipulate conditions for the fulfilment of disarmament commitments, but to maintain a process for ensuring the implementation of those commitments through concrete actions.

Too often we witness here resolutions that elaborate detailed means with little attention to whether those means are actually achieving the agreed ends. This is especially true with respect to resolutions dealing with nuclear disarmament, which year after year say surprisingly little about the concrete reductions needed in nuclear arsenals, their delivery systems, and relevant fissile material and production capabilities. The lack of specific benchmarks in these areas complicates the process of ensuring accountability. The absence of this “results-based” approach is further hindering the effectiveness of the machinery.

The solution is clear: the greater that resolutions focus on concrete results—both in disarmament and the regulation of armaments—the more meaningful will become the Committee’s substantive deliberations. This is an approach that will enable a genuinely constructive deliberative process, and the stakes involved could scarcely be higher.

It is no exaggeration to say that disarmament and the regulation of armaments have profound significance for the wider goals of the United Nations. Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1959, Philip Noel-Baker described this relationship as follows:

*Disarmament is not a policy by itself: it is part of the general policy of the UN. But it is a vital part of that policy; without it, the UN institutions can never function as they should.*

Progress in disarmament reduces threat perceptions amongst States, and is the most effective antidote to arms races. By contributing to the reduction of military expenditures, it enables the rational allocation of scarce resources to meet basic human needs. By eliminating or regulating weapons that slaughter civilians on a large scale, they serve to advance
humanitarian goals. And by agreements limiting the implements for the conduct of aggression and armed conflict, disarmament advances the larger cause of the rule of law.

The most alarming headlines today, however, do not deal with the fearsome prospect of nuclear war. They deal instead with the persistence of armed conflicts raging inside States—conflicts in many cases involving non-State actors that are armed to the teeth with some of the most lethal conventional arms ever developed.

I am not speaking just of the horrific consequences of the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, or the use of improvised explosive devices. We are now seeing non-State actors armed with battle tanks, multiple rocket launchers, and heavy artillery and mortars.

And rest assured, those non-State actors did not themselves manufacture that weaponry. They were able to acquire them from outside suppliers, black market brokers, State suppliers, or poorly protected armories. The problem is all the worse since it has been married to asymmetric terrorism, which has obviously been flagrantly contrary to the most revered norms of international humanitarian and human rights law.

This is the context in which the Committee will commence its substantive work in 2014. If delegations adopt the course of compromise and bridge-building, if they search for common ground rather than just stake claims, if they recognize that flexibility in the selection of means to achieve great common ends is no weakness, if they adopt standards for use in achieving these goals, and if they build mutual trust and confidence—then this Committee does have an opportunity to move forward on its great agenda items relating to disarmament and the regulation of armaments. As the distinguished Ambassador from Nigeria, Her Excellency U. Joy Ogwu, once put it, “Let us consider what binds us together as one people and as one human family … The common ground is too often ignored”.1

For its part, the First Committee has many roles to play in the UN disarmament machinery. The norms, goals, recommendations, and priorities agreed in this Committee have the potential to mature into a larger consensus in field after field, yielding new multilateral norms as the machinery continues its work.

At stake is a lot more than the future of disarmament. At stake is the future of what the UN can accomplish across the full gamut of its most important mandates. I can scarcely imagine a more important responsibility—nor a greater opportunity to make a positive contribution at a time when such progress is most needed in the world community. For this reason, please accept my best wishes for success as you commence this important work.

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