Remarks on the Closing of the 2012 Session of the Conference on Disarmament

By

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Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the Conference on Disarmament (CD), whose mandate derives from the first Special Session of the General Assembly on disarmament. It was endowed with the potential to advance the rule of law in disarmament. This is its unique function in the UN disarmament machinery.

Over the years, the Conference and its predecessors have produced an impressive record of achievements. I will not list all the treaties. You know them well. They have served to reduce existential threats to humanity. However, these threats are far from having been eliminated and institutional challenges also remain to be resolved.

As the 2012 session of the CD draws to a close, I recognise with satisfaction that the Members of the Conference have reached agreement on its report to the 67th session of the General Assembly. In this regard, I would like to express my appreciation to all delegations for their flexibility and preparedness to work in a cooperative spirit. My special gratitude goes to the President of the Conference Ambassador Hellmut Hoffmann for his leadership and diplomatic skills while steering the process.

I would like to pay tribute to all outgoing presidents—Ecuador, Egypt, Ethiopia, Finland, France and Germany—for their efforts to overcome the long negotiating impasse in the Conference. I am also grateful to the Secretary-General of the CD, Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, for his many efforts to help Member States to move forward at a time when neutral or reverse are not acceptable options.

In spite of all these efforts, this session has once again reached an impasse. This disappointing outcome will be widely viewed as a setback in the effort to advance global disarmament goals, in particular the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The CD’s difficulties are due not to a lack of commitment among States to the core issues on its agenda. The thematic discussions initiated by the Ethiopian Presidency and held here for the last several months witnessed just the opposite. Delegations from 49 Member States of the CD as well as observer States took part in the substantive discussions on the agenda items. These debates were supplemented by gatherings of scientific experts and diplomats in meetings on technical issues related to a fissile material treaty organized by Germany and the Netherlands, as well as by the UNIDIR Conference on outer space security.

Yet the stalemate continues and I believe its deeper roots lie in the CD’s external political environment. It is difficult to commence negotiations when key policy priorities and perceived interests of States are in conflict, especially when some of these differences might also reflect domestic political considerations.

Overcoming this stalemate will therefore require a lot more than institutional reforms inside the CD or simply finding a new venue for negotiations. It will require a genuine commitment by Member States to build upon shared interests—and to recognize that cooperative multilateral diplomacy focused on establishing global norms offers far greater
potential to advance national security interests than self-help alone. Until this bridge is crossed, the “rust” in the UN disarmament machinery will likely continue to accumulate—but if this impasse persists, we should not blame the machinery.

As former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld once put it, “Essential difficulties encountered within the UN are based on realities and not on the specific constitution of the Organization.”

I join the CD Secretary-General in recognizing that this difficult political environment cannot be an excuse for complacency. We all should expand our efforts to reach a compromise based on statesmanship and recognize the need to pursue shared interests.

Throughout this session, many States called for preserving the CD as the single multilateral disarmament negotiating body and insisted on its exclusive prerogative to negotiate nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation issues. At the same time, others believe that the longer the CD remains in deadlock, the more it has lost credibility and legitimacy as the central body of multilateral disarmament negotiations. They have also suggested looking at the possibility of taking some of these issues out of the CD. A number of different formulas have been suggested, including pursuit of a fissile material treaty as a priority or advancing nuclear disarmament pursuant to a comprehensive framework.

Yet both of these goals are fully global in scope and cannot be effectively addressed merely through compacts adopted by coalitions of the willing. One of the most widely agreed standards of multilateral disarmament agreements is that they should be universal in membership. This is why the consensus rule exists—it rests on the common-sense notion that universal norms require universal support.

While many efforts have been undertaken to explore alternatives to the CD, greater attention should arguably be directed to exploring diplomatic means of establishing a political climate that can enable to CD to commence negotiations. In short, the failures of the CD are not the failures of the CD—they are failures of diplomacy. The burdens of real progress rest with the Member States, not the forums in which they meet.

As a negotiating venue, the CD and its predecessors have proven capable of negotiating multilateral treaties even during the negative political environment of the Cold War, conditions far worse than prevail today. What will it take to revive this institution and to restore its status as the single multilateral disarmament negotiations forum?

With respect to nuclear disarmament, this will entail a renewed commitment by the States with the largest nuclear arsenals to accelerate progress in nuclear disarmament.

At the same time, its Members have to employ all available means to reach a common political will and to enable this body to fulfil its mandate. This is less of a challenge of administrative reform than of reconciling differences among Member States through diplomacy. These may include high-level consultations in different formats, new approaches to addressing key issues and, of course, the forthcoming 67th session of the General Assembly, which provides the broadest platform to consider new initiatives.

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This is no easy challenge. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pointed out in his opinion piece published in leading newspapers throughout the globe on 30 August 2012, “the solution clearly lies in greater efforts by States to harmonize their actions to achieve common ends”. He also indicated eleven specific actions that all States and civil society should pursue to break the impasse. Most of them relate directly to subjects addressed at the CD.

The thematic discussions during the current session have also brought forward a number of proposals which, if thoroughly examined, could help find a way out of the deadlock. All suggestions aimed at forming a basis for resuming negotiations deserve to be considered.

This also relates to the suggestion of developing a simplified approach, including the conduct of parallel negotiations on at least two core issues. Achieving great disarmament goals will require parallel efforts on several tracks, rather than sequential efforts leaving nuclear disarmament as the last to be achieved.

The recent discussions on the revitalization of the Conference have brought forth many interesting reform ideas that go far beyond a simple review of the CD’s Rules of Procedure and touch upon the functioning of the entire disarmament machinery. In particular, I would like to thank Mr. Tokayev for his proposals made on 14 February 2012, which helped trigger the discussion on this matter in the CD. Although some of his ideas were met with caution, there is no doubt they formed a solid ground for further work and may serve as a source of practical solutions in improving the operation and increasing the effectiveness of the CD.

Mr. President,
Distinguished Delegates,

Now that another year has passed without disarmament negotiations at the CD, Member States at the General Assembly will have to consider the fate of the negotiations on a fissile material treaty, of the rest of its agenda, and of the Conference as a whole. In this connection, I would like to make a few brief concluding remarks.

First, defending their national security is obviously a key priority of all Member States. Not surprisingly, they view disarmament negotiations through the lens of their national security interests. That is well understood and respected. At the same time, the security of each country very much depends on a variety of factors, which are often non-military in nature. National security is also linked to the security of one’s neighbours, and to regional and global security. Recognizing this indivisibility of security is the first and most crucial step toward advancing the security interests of all, at the expense of none.

Second, Member States of the United Nations and the CD have justifiably been proud of its past achievements in advancing disarmament. The international community expects the CD not to duplicate deliberative activities pursued elsewhere in the UN disarmament machinery, but to commence multilateral negotiations leading to new legal obligations to address some of the gravest threats to international peace and security, especially those arising from nuclear weapons. The world is facing new risks and challenges to our common security. If we manage to address the challenges of disarmament, we will be able to better create a platform for common actions to address these new challenges as well.

Thank you for your attention.