Introductory Remarks

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Special Briefing on the Work of the First Committee
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I wish at the outset to thank the Permanent Missions of Egypt and Indonesia, as well as the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), for co-organizing this Special Briefing on the Work of the First Committee.

This briefing is focused on the work of one of the key components of the United Nations disarmament machinery—an ensemble of special UN and international forums established for the purposes of deliberating and establishing multilateral norms for disarmament.

There is a division of labour in this machinery, dealing at one extreme with the UN Disarmament Commission serving in a purely deliberative role and at the other extreme we have the Conference on Disarmament, with its mandate to negotiate multilateral disarmament treaties.

In between these mandates, we find the First Committee. On one level, it too serves a deliberative role, except unlike the UNDC, the scope of the issues on the First Committee’s agenda is much broader, historically encompassing the full gamut of issues in the field of disarmament, including the elimination of weapons of mass destruction and the regulation—or specific prohibition—of conventional armaments. Its primary outputs are resolutions intended to establish or strengthen multilateral norms in these fields.

Yet the annual work of the First Committee in considering and adopting over 50 resolutions relating to disarmament issues goes beyond a purely deliberative role. This is apparent in the extensive consideration given by Member States to the detailed texts of these resolutions. There is significance even in how these resolutions were adopted, with or without a vote. There is significance in the breakdown of who is voting for what, in particular what coalitions of States are supporting particular initiatives, and how the composition of those coalitions changes over time.

There is even significance in the annual adoption of resolutions that contain largely the same substantive content, at times even the identical language, as that which appeared in previous resolutions. Many Member States view such resolutions not simply as needless repetition, but as a means to promote wider acceptance of emerging multilateral norms.

The tools available to the First Committee also include the authority to establish mandates for more focused deliberations or negotiations, as most recently illustrated by the mandate for an international conference to commence negotiations on an arms trade treaty. It can commission studies and reports. It can create groups of governmental experts and establish open-ended working groups.
These are all part of a dynamic process by which the First Committee goes about its work.

I would urge all concerned to examine the work of this Committee against the wider tapestry of the Committee’s efforts over many years to advance multilateral disarmament norms. The work of this committee is best understood by viewing it as part of an unfolding process, rather than as a collection of snap-shots frozen in time. The Committee’s resolutions and other activities are not as ends in themselves, but collective efforts to move the global disarmament agenda forward in specific fields by achieving concrete results.

Certainly the balance of votes on resolutions is one way to measure such progress, while another is to determine whether resolutions that once required votes are now being adopted without a vote. Progress is also apparent in the content of the statements made in this Committee, for it is readily apparent soon in the Committee’s deliberations whether there is general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the results being achieved in implementing these resolutions.

To this extent, the votes and statements made in this Committee serve as a useful indicator of the amount of consensus that exists in the world community in measures intended to advance disarmament goals. They serve to identify or to reaffirm priorities among issues and initiatives. And these deliberations also provide an opportunity, however modest in the eyes of many, for civil society to participate in the work of the Committee. I view this latter aspect as important in helping to build political support and to strengthen the legitimacy of the various initiatives considered by the Committee in an open deliberative process.

This particular Special Briefing will focus on certain specific issues, including the resolutions dealing with nuclear weapons and conventional arms, the activities of the three UN regional centres for peace and disarmament, developments relating to regional nuclear-weapon-free zones, the status of work in the NPT Review process, and an update on the deliberations of the Group of Governmental experts on Transparency and Confidence-building Measures in Outer Space Activities.

I wish to congratulate UNITAR the Permanent Missions of Egypt and Indonesia for organizing this timely Special Briefing, and to reassure all participants that the Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to assist all delegations in making this year’s Committee deliberations a success.

Thank you and best wishes to you all in the work that lies ahead.