Opening Remarks

By

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22 February 2012
United Nations, New York
I am pleased to have the privilege of opening this 57th Session of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters—its first session in 2012, which is a transitional year in many ways.

First of all, we are very fortunate to have with us today a new member—Ambassador Istvan Gyarmati—who I know will make many valuable contributions to your deliberations. Ambassador Gyarmati, welcome aboard to the Board.

And we are witnessing today another transition, as we express our collective appreciation to Professor Olga Pellicer for her distinguished service as Chairperson last year, and congratulate her successor, Ambassador Hewa Palihakkara as he assumes his new duties as Chair.

As I look over the items on the Board’s agenda this year, I am tempted not only to extend my best wishes, but in some respects also my sympathies, because none of these issues is easy to resolve. Indeed, that is precisely why the Secretary-General is seeking your advice on best ways to approach them.

The first agenda item pertains to the future of the United Nations architecture for the regulation of conventional arms. Controlling such arms is actually one of the oldest goals of the United Nations organization. The subject is explicitly cited in the Charter, was the focus of General Assembly resolutions as early as 1946, and in various incarnations has long been an issue before the Security Council ever since it adopted a resolution in 1947 to create the Commission on Conventional Armaments. In 1959, the General Assembly included the regulation of such weaponry as an integral component of the concept of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”—which became the world community’s “ultimate objective” at the General Assembly’s first Special Session on Disarmament.

Unfortunately, the “rule of law” has advanced very unevenly throughout the field of disarmament, especially with respect to conventional arms. Under Article 26 of the Charter the Security Council has the responsibility to prepare, with the assistance of its Military Staff Committee, plans “for the establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments.” Yet these plans never materialized, and the Military Staff Committee became an empty shell, as the world chose alternative approaches to address conventional arms issues. Typically this involved the development of initiatives on narrowly circumscribed issues, pursued in a prolonged step-by-step process—a process featuring piecemeal, incremental advances while avoiding the more integrated or holistic approach embodied in the concept of general and complete disarmament.

This has led to some positive results, but these have evolved in a somewhat haphazard manner, yielding a patchwork of multilateral initiatives, only very loosely integrated into a common framework, and rarely approaching universal participation.
To enhance transparency, for example, we have the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the UN Report on Military Expenditures. To confront the illicit trafficking in small arms, we have the 2001 Programme of Action and the deliberative process of biennial meetings to follow, as well as the International Tracing Instrument and the Firearms Protocol to the Convention on Transnational Organized Crime. To address uniquely inhumane weapons, we have the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. Other arms having particularly harmful and indiscriminate effects have been the subject of specific conventions negotiated in ad hoc fora. And we all are aware of progressive efforts leading to the UN conference this year to negotiate an arms trade treaty—which, considering the age of the UN’s regulatory mandate for conventional arms, surely qualifies for the label, “better late than never.”

Yet throughout this evolving process, which is not being undertaken in accordance with any plan and is propelled along by ad hoc initiatives, the inevitable risks arise of overlapping mandates, duplicative efforts, and the breakdown (or failure to establish) a division of labour between all the various arenas and instruments for addressing conventional arms issues. I note in this respect that the Secretary-General’s Change Plan for 2012-2016—which addresses separate structural issues concerning UN departments, programmes, and funds—places a special emphasis on developing rationalized structures and functions, while avoiding duplication. It is in a similar spirit that the Secretary-General would welcome the recommendations of the Board on how Member States could work together on making the United Nations architecture on conventional arms regulation as coherent and effective as possible.

With respect to the second item on the agenda of this session only, you may recall that last July a number of Board members stressed that it would be timely for the Board to re-examine ways to improve its method of work, particularly in connection with its composition, as well as the practice of consensus recommendations. This suggestion was also included in the report of the ABDM in 2011.

The third agenda item to be considered in the Board’s July session—concerning follow-up discussions on the revitalization of the CD—was also proposed by the Board in its report last year for future consideration. Nonetheless, due to the fact that no new developments have occurred since the Board’s last session in Geneva and that the CD has only begun its work for this year, the Secretary-General would like the Board to consider the topic again at its next session in Geneva. This would also permit the Board to take into consideration any new developments at the CD by then.

As the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), the Board will also consider the activities of the Institute from August 2011 to June 2012 and approve its programme and budget for the biennium 2012-2013, including the recommendation for a continuing subvention from the regular UN budget.
At this point in my remarks, I would like to return briefly to the theme of transition because for me, this issue is personal.

Almost five years ago, on 16 July 2007, I made my first official statement as the new United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. The occasion was the opening of the 48th Session of this Advisory Board. It is fitting that in addressing you today, I shall now make my last official statement in the position I have been so fortunate to have served.

Let me say, first of all, I wish for no member of this Board to conclude that my transition from prelude to coda as High Representative in any way suggests my retirement from the great global cause of disarmament—including the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and the limitation of conventional arms. I do hope to continue working in this field in a private capacity and to utilize whatever insights and experience I have gained at the United Nations to promote disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation.

I enjoy the collaborative nature of work in this field, the friends and colleagues I have met along the way—including on this Board—and the satisfaction of working for a cause that stands to benefit all of humanity, a cause our Secretary-General once called “a global public good of the highest order”. I especially enjoy working with young people and others in civil society, who—as emerging leaders, diplomats, taxpayers, voters, or as global citizens—will sooner than we can all imagine bear the enormous responsibilities of moving this great cause forward.

When I concluded my inaugural statement in 2007, some members of this Board had remarked that they thought my words were a bit—shall we say—on the pessimistic side. I admit that I do have high expectations for progress in this field. And I am not alone, as most of our Member States share similar expectations, as seen in the large majorities voting in favour of key disarmament resolutions each year. Additional high expectations exist in civil society for the United Nations to make its own contributions to this cause.

When I look at the many obstacles ahead to achieving global nuclear disarmament—in particular the lack of disarmament institutions, laws, regulations, plans, and budgets in the nuclear-weapon states for actually achieving zero—I do tend to worry about the prospects. I feel the same way when I see the nuclear weapon modernization programmes now underway, being propelled along by very long-range plans for the retention and improvement of existing arsenals. I sense this when I see nuclear doctrines and policies that still allow for the first-use of nuclear weapons, for holding weapons on high-alert, for deploying nuclear weapons on foreign soil, and for heralding these weapons as offering the “supreme guarantee” of security—an approach that I believe is a virtual invitation to proliferation.
Yet these political and conceptual obstacles do not at all justify the conclusion that nuclear disarmament efforts are a futile waste of time. I remain an optimist for future progress because I truly believe that the “genie” of nuclear disarmament is out of its bottle and will never return—people and governments around the world will not allow this to happen. It is not the bomb but the need for nuclear disarmament that cannot be dis-invented. As a cause uniting disparate groups in civil society and countries throughout the world, disarmament will move forward, because it serves the interests of humanity and thereby also serves the interests of all our Member States.

This Board is really superbly situated to help the Secretary-General and the UN Organization navigate through the deep thicket of political disputes and the near anarchic process of developing new multilateral norms in disarmament and the regulation of armaments. So I urge you, as you contemplate your own future transitions, not to yield to despair and self-fulfilling prophecies of the failure of disarmament efforts. We need to find ways to make disarmament measures more effective, rebut its critics, clarify that disarmament is about enhancing not diminishing security, and progressively promote the growth of the rule of law in this field.

On this optimistic valedictory note, please accept my very best wishes for a productive session, and for the success of all your future work to advance the cause of disarmament. Because as members of this Advisory Board know, disarmament matters.