Statement before the Disarmament Commission

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I am honoured to address the Disarmament Commission as it opens its 2013 substantive session and wish to commend its departing Chairman, Ambassador Enrique Román-Morey, for his competent stewardship of the work of this Commission, and to recognize with appreciation the many efforts of his Bureau. I also wish to congratulate Ambassador Christopher Grima on his election as the Chairman of the 2013 session. The Office for Disarmament Affairs stands ready to assist the Chairman, the Bureau, and all delegations throughout this session.

The Commission’s substantive work this year is commencing in a very complex international environment—one that combines both old challenges and new opportunities.

We often forget that this Commission is the oldest component of the UN disarmament machinery, having been established in a different form and with a different mandate 61 years ago. Some of us here today may experience a sense of *déjà vu* in recalling the first paragraph of the resolution¹ creating this Commission, in which the General Assembly declared that it was:

Moved by anxiety at the general lack of confidence plaguing the world and leading to the burden of increasing armaments and the fear of war

In many ways, we are still facing today this problem of “lack of confidence”, and many of the gravest challenges to international peace and security are merely reflections of this underlying condition. It is a factor that feeds instability in the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia. It helps to explain both the slow rate of progress in achieving global nuclear disarmament and the robust growth of long-term nuclear weapon modernization programmes. It underlies the relentless expansion of military budgets, in the face of unmet social and economic needs. It accounts for deeply divided votes in the General Assembly on many disarmament resolutions, especially pertaining to nuclear weapons, and it is also a root cause of the stalemate at the Conference on Disarmament.

¹ Resolution 502(VI), 11 January 1952.
Now it cannot possibly be that the function of entire UN disarmament machinery is simply to provide various arenas in which States can assemble to voice their insecurities and mutual mistrust. Quite the opposite. This machinery is intended to provide a process for building confidence through the establishment and elaboration of global norms in disarmament. And the Commission, through its purely deliberating role, serves a vital role in the early stages of developing such norms.

This is apparent in the first item on your agenda, “Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.” The Commission’s deliberations last year on this issue have revealed that while many differences persist, there is also a lot of common ground even on this difficult subject. A positive result from this session would set the stage for a new consensus on nuclear disarmament when the Commission concludes its three-year cycle next year. What a tremendous achievement that would be, especially coming on the eve of the 2015 NPT Review Conference and given the persisting difficulties in commencing negotiations on nuclear disarmament at the Conference on Disarmament.

Throughout the history of UN efforts in disarmament, efforts to eliminate weapons of mass destruction have been pursued in parallel with efforts to regulate and reduce conventional arms. This is because they are mutually reinforcing goals. Together, they are part of an integrated approach to fulfilling the Charter’s goals of disarmament and the regulation of armaments—what was later called “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”. The fact is, we need concrete progress in both of these fields and this Commission has its own contributions to make.

With respect to the second item on your agenda, “Practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional weapons”, you have a splendid opportunity to build on the recent progress made last month in negotiating the Arms Trade Treaty. As efforts continue to conclude that treaty, the fulfillment of the larger Charter-based objective of the “regulation of armaments” will also require many additional initiatives, especially in the field of confidence-building.

To a considerable extent, many practical confidence-building measures relate to transparency, which the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs has worked to improve over the years. This is seen in our work in maintaining the United Nations Report on Military Expenditures, along with the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, an electronic database of information provided by Member States on CBM’s, and another database on national legislation, regulations and procedures on the transfer of arms. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage all Member States to make good use of these transparency measures precisely because of their value in building the indispensable confidence needed to strengthen international peace and security.

While the issues I have addressed today are substantive, I know that the administrative and procedural aspects of your work are also important. Regardless of the component of the UN disarmament machinery, it is always possible to improve existing methods of work. A worthy goal here would be to revive the productivity of the Disarmament Commission as an international resource for cultivating what might be called the seeds of future global disarmament norms—guidelines, standards, and recommendations that someday have the potential to flourish into customary practices observed by all Member States.
In the 20 years since its re-establishment in 1979, the Commission—on no less than sixteen occasions—was able to reach a consensus to adopt guidelines or recommendations on wide variety of disarmament subjects. It is of course true that the Commission’s procedures alone certainly do not explain why it has been unable to adopt any new guidelines since 1999—one must also consider the differences of policy priorities of States. Even so, the Commission has a legitimate continuing interest in examining whether there are alternative procedures to assist the Commission in achieving concrete results. In the end, history will judge the Commission’s record less by the volume of its words than the quality of its outcomes.

I recognize that the issues on your agenda are profoundly difficult on many levels—but that is why they are there. If they were easy they would have already been solved. They are there because they are important and because the General Assembly has confidence in this Commission to reach a positive outcome in its deliberations. I wish you all the very best as you commence your work and know that this confidence has not been misplaced.