Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General
To the Conference

Vision Statement

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**Introduction**

The Conference on Disarmament is at a crucial juncture. Growing frustration is felt by a majority of its Members over the long-standing impasse and the inability to progress to negotiations, in particular on a fissile material treaty.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, has made several calls for the Conference to resume its substantive work. In September 2010, he convened a High-level meeting in New York in support of the work of the Conference on Disarmament. Subsequently, his Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters was tasked to address the issue.

At the request by 49 member states, from 27 to 29 July 2011, the United Nations General Assembly held a plenary meeting under agenda item 162, entitled “Revitalizing the Work of the Conference on Disarmament and Taking Forward Multilateral Disarmament Negotiations”.

At that meeting, Mr. Ban Ki-moon delivered a strong statement, stressing the urgency to find a way out of the Conference’s current stalemate. This statement can be considered a milestone in the efforts to reinvigorate the multilateral disarmament process.

Further to the recommendations of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, the Secretary-General is considering a decision on the possible establishment of a high-level panel of eminent persons to address the different issues, in particular the revitalisation of the broader disarmament machinery. The Advisory Board also suggested to the Secretary-General to encourage progress on a programme of work based on the consensus document CD/1864 and proposed to continue raising public awareness and encourage civil society to offer their inputs to overcome the prolonged stalemate.
Challenges

There are two sets of problems of a very different character obstructing progress in the Conference on Disarmament:

One is political as there is no agreement on what priority should be given to the different items on the agenda, in particular the four core issues. A large majority of members are ready to start negotiations on a fissile material treaty. There are good reasons to do so as a fissile material treaty is a logical next step among the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation objectives. Differences regarding the scope of such a fissile material treaty, emanating from national security concerns, pre-empt the start of negotiations.

The other set of problems is structural. The Rules of Procedure of the Conference, the membership and its agenda are based on an international environment that dates back to the Cold War.

Some of the procedures, such as the monthly rotating presidency and the annual adoption of the programme of work, are impairing the efficiency of the Conference.

While it is true that increasing the membership would not solve the problems, a body such as the Conference on Disarmament needs to be representative of the wider international community. It is important to keep in mind that the Conference is funded from the regular budget of the United Nations.

The agenda dates back to 1978 and might be reassessed to reflect the current international security environment.

The rule of consensus should be interpreted as an encouragement to come to an agreement to start substantive work.
Conclusions

In order to make progress, political flexibility needs to be shown. CD/1864 can still be the basis of an agreement on a programme of work. Members of the Conference are strongly encouraged to continue working on this or a very similar basis to overcome the impasse. The consensus rule comes with the privilege for finding ways to a general agreement but not for blocking real negotiations.

Attempts to determine the outcome of negotiations before even starting them are hampering the Conference in moving forward. The real protection of national security interests should lie in the process of negotiations, and later, in the legal process of whether or not to sign and ratify a treaty. Perceived national security concerns should not keep the rest of the international community idle with regard to real disarmament.

The Conference on Disarmament fits in the category of institutions that - if not existent - would need to be established. The multilateral disarmament negotiating body has immense value and is irreplaceable as a means to pursue undivided security.

Every effort to preserve the Conference as the single platform for conducting multilateral negotiations on disarmament issues should be made.

A transformed Conference should continue to play an essential role in the future. To that end, all possibilities for its revitalization have to be explored.

As the Secretary-General said, “the problem lies not with the vehicle, but with the driver. What is needed most of all is a closer alignment between policy priorities and multilateral disarmament goals.”