REMARKS TO THE OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON THE FOURTH SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY DEVOTED TO DISARMAMENT

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Chairman, Fernando Luque  
Distinguished Bureau  
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen  

It is a pleasure to represent the Office for Disarmament Affairs at the opening of this Working Group. Over the coming days and, indeed, in your future sessions, you have an opportunity to consider the current state of multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation in the context of a possible fourth special session on disarmament—or SSODIV.  

A significant part of the value of this working group lies in its universal membership and informal nature. With its inclusive and interactive character, this open-ended working group is well placed to seek possible areas of convergence on critical matters of disarmament and non-proliferation.  

At a time when there are growing divisions over the pace of nuclear disarmament, increasing concerns about spiralling military budgets, and mounting frustration about the efficacy of the disarmament machinery, we should all welcome the opportunity to contemplate how to address these anxieties, including through the provision of substantive recommendations to the General Assembly for a possible SSODIV.  

This is surely a difficult task, but a worthwhile endeavour nonetheless, particularly as progress in this context could have positive effects across the disarmament field.  

As you know, throughout his tenure, the Secretary-General has been resolutely committed to disarmament. In his words, “the international community must find common ground and come together to achieve our shared dream of a world free of nuclear weapons.”  

Bearing in mind the call of the Secretary-General, I urge you to use your time effectively and to use the prior discussions on this matter – from 1996 to 1999 in the Disarmament Commission and in Working Groups in 2003 and 2007 – as a basis from which to build. Various proposals have been presented by Member States in these past forums. I would encourage delegations to draw upon previous discussions with a view to identifying possible points of agreement, no matter how small of an agreement it may seem.  

In thinking about possible recommendations to make to the General Assembly on possible objectives and an agenda for an SSODIV, I’d like to take this opportunity to discuss some general trends, emerging issues and systemic problems that this Working Group could consider.  

First, the world is a vastly different place than it was in 1978 at the time of SSOD1 or even 2007, the last Working Group. Today’s international security climate is a complex mix of perennial challenges, emerging threats, existing rivalries and burgeoning strategic competition.
The disarmament regime has been complicated by: the increasing militarisation of space; cyber threats to international peace and security; the rapid evolution of technology as exemplified by Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles; the nexus between powerful non-state actors and WMD; ever-expanding military budgets and a trillion dollar global arms trade; and the re-emergence of the use of chemical weapons.

Second, despite this raft of new concerns, persistent challenges must be addressed. Chief amongst them is, of course, nuclear disarmament. The existential threat posed by nuclear weapons means the international community must have a say in deciding how we achieve the shared goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. However, the divisions between the nuclear ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ are broader than ever. Frustration over the pace and scale of nuclear disarmament is having detrimental ramifications for the multilateral disarmament regime as a whole thus causing significant uncertainty over next steps in disarmament.

Against this backdrop of frustration and dissatisfaction, and after decades without tangible results, it is inarguable that the UN disarmament machinery is sclerotic and has sunk into a deep malaise.

I would be remiss, however, to ignore past successes. The existing machinery has produced some landmark achievements in disarmament, not least of which are the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

Yet, in deciding whether the machinery is fit for purpose, we must ask ourselves several questions. For example, what has been the role of external security conditions or the absence of political will in the dearth of results? What could be the role of other approaches such as the humanitarian initiative in overcoming these impasses? How can positive interaction in this forum facilitate discussion by the General Assembly, the Conference on Disarmament and other relevant parts of the machinery?

I strongly encourage this Working Group to think strategically about the disarmament machinery and devise practical, innovative and creative solutions that can help break the existing deadlock at a time when the machinery is undoubtedly in need of an injection of encouraging energy.

I wish you the best of luck in your deliberations.

Thank you.