For the Record

2016 session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission

Opening Statement
by
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On behalf of the United States Delegation, please allow me to congratulate you and the Government of Vanuatu on your election to the Chairmanship of the 2016 session of the UN Disarmament Commission. Mr. Ambassador, we look forward to working with you as you ably discharge your important duties.

We also congratulate the other members of the Commission’s Bureau for their elections to date. And let us express our appreciation to Mr. Kim Won-soo, High Representative for Disarmament, for his compelling presentation this morning.

The Prague Agenda: The work continues

Mr. Chairman, in April 2009, President Obama laid out his vision for a world without nuclear weapons and his agenda for reducing nuclear dangers. The President made clear that while global nuclear disarmament was a long term, generational project, there are steps that we can take today to create the conditions for achieving this shared objective of the international community.

In support of this agenda, just last week President Obama hosted the fourth Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC. These Summits have contributed measurably to international security, spurring concrete actions to decrease HEU and plutonium stocks, improve security measures for safeguarding nuclear facilities and transporting nuclear materials, and strengthen capacity to counter nuclear smuggling. Through the Summit Process, the international community has also strengthened the international organizations, institutions and multilateral legal instruments that make up the global nuclear security architecture, and improved coordination among them. In the post-2016 approach to nuclear security, we will look to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN, Interpol, the G-7 Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass
Destruction (Global Partnership), and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT) to contribute to the sustainability of the Summit process, through the implementation of individual institutional Action Plans that the Leaders adopted on April 1.

Also of note, on January 16, the IAEA verified that Iran completed the nuclear-related steps it committed to under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The nuclear deal will ensure Iran’s nuclear program is and remains exclusively peaceful by cutting off all of Iran’s pathways to enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon, and by putting in place the inspections and transparency necessary to verify that Iran is complying with the deal.

Mr. Chairman, for its part, the United States is committed to our Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments, including with regard to Article VI. Despite the lack of a final document at the 2015 NPT Review Conference (RevCon), statements at the RevCon demonstrated overwhelming and deep-seated international support for the Treaty and for its enduring contribution to international peace and security. The 2020 RevCon will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Treaty, and it will be important, substantively and symbolically. We look forward to working with all States Parties as preparations for the 2020 RevCon get under way.

Mr. Chairman, our bilateral nuclear reduction efforts with the Russian Federation are an essential part of our comprehensive, full-spectrum approach to nuclear disarmament. The U.S. stockpile today is 85 percent lower than the Cold War high. Three years ago, in June 2013 in Berlin, President Obama stated the U.S. willingness to negotiate with Russia a reduction of up to one-third of our deployed strategic weapons from the level established in the New START Treaty. That offer is still on the table. Progress requires a willing partner and a conducive strategic environment.

In the multilateral realm, most recently at the Conference on Disarmament (CD), we have proposed a creative compromise to begin long-delayed negotiations on a global treaty banning the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices. In any such CD negotiation, all issues would be on the table for discussion, and all national equities would be protected by the principle of consensus. An in-force Fissile Material Treaty and Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty will impose quantitative and qualitative caps on nuclear weapon stockpiles, which in turn will help to set the foundation for the world without nuclear weapons that all of us seek to establish. In making our latest
fissile material proposal in the CD, we earnestly tried to take the stated concerns of all CD Member States into account. Our proposal has received strong support from many CD Member States, and also remains on the table.

Mr. Chairman, in pursuing nuclear disarmament, the United States embraces a realistic and practical approach. We can never separate disarmament from the global security environment or strategic stability considerations, or divorce it from our security commitments to friends and allies. Progress on nuclear disarmament will not be made by ignoring the security imperative of retaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent for as long as nuclear weapons exist.

In seeking to build support for realistic and practical measures for nuclear disarmament, it is clear that more genuine dialogue between the nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States is needed.

This is one reason why in Prague in December 2014, Under Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller announced a new initiative by the United States to form an International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification. The Partnership is composed of both nuclear-weapon States and non-nuclear-weapon States, and is being implemented in collaboration with the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI).

The Partnership builds on prior efforts, such as the U.K.-Norway Initiative, which began in 2007 by seeking practical solutions to future arms control and disarmament technical challenges. We thank both nations for their pioneering efforts in this exciting work.

The Partnership aims to build capacity in the field of nuclear disarmament verification, for without such capacity global nuclear disarmament will never be achieved. The Partnership is also furthering understanding of the complexities inherent in nuclear disarmament verification and monitoring. For example, under the New START Treaty, inspection activities are focused on delivery vehicles. But in a future agreement, we are likely to be focused on individual warheads, which is a new and difficult challenge. The Partnership offers international leadership by facilitating technical progress to address the challenges of nuclear disarmament verification.

Mr. Chairman, in March 2015, the Partners agreed to establish three working groups: one on monitoring and verification objectives; one on on-site inspections; and one examining technical challenges and solutions. The Partnership’s three working groups met for the first time in Geneva in February to continue their work.
In Geneva, more than 80 experts from 20 countries participated in the working group discussions. The working groups developed a simple scenario involving the dismantlement of a notional nuclear weapon, the related inspection of that dismantlement by a team of experts representing the interests of all participating States, and the related technologies that could support such an inspection. This scenario allows the three working groups to coordinate and focus their efforts and develop common understandings of the challenges and potential solutions associated with nuclear disarmament verification. The working groups’ Terms of Reference, which provide the framework for these groups to continue to pursue their technical discussions and work, are posted in their entirety on the State Department’s and NTI’s websites.

Partner countries will receive an update from each working group at the next plenary, and we are grateful to Japan for agreeing to host this meeting in June.

2016 UNDC Agenda

Mr. Chairman, last year, the Commission embarked on its 2015-2017 agenda by focusing on two long-standing topics:

In Working Group I (WG I), chaired by Kazakhstan, “Recommendations for achieving the objective of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons,” and in Working Group II (WG II), chaired by Morocco, “Practical confidence-building measures [CBMs] in the field of conventional weapons.” We thank both Working Group Chairmen for their leadership to date, and look forward to working with them again this year.

As we all know, these particular topics have been on the Commission’s agenda for a number of years, and regrettably, success in forging consensus recommendations on either subject has continued to elude us. Last year, both Working Group Chairs drafted serious, though non-consensus texts for our ongoing consideration. From the U.S. perspective, while none of these documents in their current state are perfect, and each needs more work, we feel that each represents a reasonable basis for further deliberations.

Outer Space TCBMs

As we have noted in this Commission since April 2014, the United States is committed to the stable, sustainable, and peaceful use and protection of outer space to support the vital interests of all nations. In this regard, the United States was
pleased to co-sponsor with Russia and China UN General Assembly Resolutions 68/50, 69/38, and 70/53. All three resolutions refer the recommendations contained in the 2013 consensus report of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in Outer Space Activities (A/68/189) to the UNDC for consideration. All three resolutions were adopted by the General Assembly without a vote.

During its 70th session in October 2015, the General Assembly also held an unprecedented ad hoc joint meeting of the First and Fourth Committees to address “possible challenges to space security and sustainability.” The exchanges highlighted the importance of taking near-term, pragmatic steps consistent with the GGE report.

The GGE’s recommendations on space transparency and confidence-building measures, or TCBMs, are an ideal topic for in-depth consideration as part of the Commission’s agenda for the remainder of the current issue cycle. This year, we once again propose that the Commission establish a working group to address the preparation of recommendations to promote the implementation of TCBMs in outer space activities.

As this working group progresses, it should also take into account discussions on space TCBMs in the Conference on Disarmament and UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), which also received the GGE report for consideration. In previous U.S. consultations on this matter, many delegations expressed an understanding of the potential value in the Commission addressing space TCBMs. We look forward to working with all other delegations in adding space TCBMs to the Commission’s agenda this session.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, in the end, our ability to make headway in this body will depend on how prepared delegations are to exhibit flexibility and practice compromise. Given past disappointments here, we are under no illusions about the challenges before us. We simply need to keep trying and to try harder. The Disarmament Commission is an important element of the UN’s existing multilateral disarmament machinery and is worthy of such efforts. The United States pledges to do all that it can to help find a viable way forward for the work of this Commission.

I thank you, Sir.