Opening Remarks by High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu to the First Committee on follow-up to resolutions and decisions adopted by the Committee at its previous sessions/presentation of reports (including on UNIDIR pursuant to General Assembly resolution 70/69)

New York
16 October 2018
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to join you today. The title of this session is “Follow-up of resolutions and decisions adopted by the First Committee.” If I were following past practice, I would be discussing several resolutions and mandates that emanated from the work of this body in its previous session. However, with your permission, I would like to focus my presentation today solely on one topic, the Report of the Secretary-General on the future structural, financial, administrative and operational aspects of United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR).

I want to thank senior colleagues who are joining me on the podium today, His Excellency, Ambassador Vladimir Drobnjak, Permanent Representative of Croatia who has been the Chair of the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters and UNIDIR’s Board of Trustees in 2018, and Dr. Renata Dwan, who was appointed Director of UNIDIR by the Secretary-General earlier this year. I look forward to their participation and comments and will call upon their detailed knowledge in responding to your questions.

I am pleased to discuss an issue that you last addressed three years ago. The funding and operations of UNIDIR is not new to this body. You have considered the issue on the occasion of UNIDIR’s anniversary, every five years, for almost 40 years. In 2015, you requested the Secretary-General to commission an assessment by an independent third party on a sustainable and stable UNIDIR funding structure and operating model and to report thereon during this session. As you will have an opportunity to discuss more broadly the work of the Institute when you debate the disarmament machinery, today I will focus my remarks on report A/73/284, which responds to this request.

Let me begin by saying that underpinning the Secretary-General’s report is the recognition of UNIDIR’s strategic role in disarmament processes and fora. Time and again, the Institute has demonstrated a proven track-record in convening and facilitating difficult discussions. Coupled with the technical competence of its expert networks, UNIDIR’s unique
place in the UN’s disarmament machinery can be a crucial factor in supporting multilateral engagement and paving the way for progress on a number of disarmament objectives.

The independent assessment that informs this report is not the first review of UNIDIR’s financing, but it is the most comprehensive. I am grateful to all those involved, particularly those of you who gave of your time to meet with the consultants earlier this year. The assessment has been made available to interested Member States and, I understand, delegations in Geneva had the opportunity to be briefed on its findings in June and September of this year.

While the subject of UNIDIR’s sustainability is not new, the environment in which we discuss it today has undergone some fundamental shifts. As the Secretary-General highlighted in his Agenda for Disarmament, the risks and the realities of competition and conflict today are challenging the universality, consensus and rule-based system that provided the foundations of arms control in the twentieth century. Technological innovation, meanwhile, is expanding the means and methods of warfare and raising fundamental questions for the goals, tools and actors in twenty-first century arms control. The need for effective arms control and disarmament to help preserve and adapt our multilateral system - and to ensure a more stable and secure world for all – has never been so great.

Yet it comes after a period when disarmament was regarded as more on the periphery than at the core of international peace and security. The institutions and instruments of multilateral disarmament have experienced the impact of diminished attention and resources over the past decade and more. For an entity such as UNIDIR, which is primarily voluntarily funded, the impact has been particularly significant. Despite the wide appreciation expressed for UNIDIR’s institutional and technical knowledge and policy ideas, and the engagement of many State and non-State actors in its varied activities and events, only a small proportion of Member States contribute to the functioning of UNIDIR today. Those States that do, as the assessment points out, tend to earmark their contributions for specific activities that reflect their national policy priorities.

The relative decline in and earmarking of voluntary resources has been accompanied by stagnation in the contribution provided to the Institute from the United Nations’ regular budget. The assessment highlighted how the subvention constituted almost 30 percent of the Institute’s
budget in 2000: today, it represents 9 percent of UNIDIR’s financing. These two trends have hit the institutional operations of the Institute hardest and in turn, negatively impact its visibility and outreach beyond Geneva.

Today’s disarmament environment is not so much stagnant as deeply divided. In our polarized context, the importance of actors that can contribute to shared problem identification and collective solutions becomes vital. As the assessment illustrates, UNIDIR’s strength lies in its legitimacy, credibility and impartiality for broad swathes of Member States. It is this view that led the Conference on Disarmament to request UNIDIR to provide research and knowledge support to discussions in each of the five subsidiary bodies you established this year. It is this technical expertise that encourages my Office, as well as an increasing number of UN entities, to turn to UNIDIR for inputs, whether to groups of governmental experts or to reviews of arms embargos. It is this reputation that underpins practical requests for UNIDIR support, on the basis of its deep policy, research and technical expertise, to the development of national weapons management frameworks in Somalia, West Africa and elsewhere. And it is this recognition of the need for new ideas and more inclusive dialogue to reinvigorate disarmament that has led the Secretary-General to request UNIDIR to support action across his Agenda.

An autonomous research institution is not a fair-weather resource in a time of plenty; it supports and helps sustain multilateral processes during periods of impasse and stalemate.

For this reason, the Secretary-General and I see today’s discussion less as of a legacy of past debates on UNIDIR than as a dialogue on the future of multilateral disarmament. It is a conversation in which, regardless of our perspective, we all have a stake. At its heart is the proposition that shared knowledge, facts, ideas and dialogue can help us in collectively tackling threats to international security. This is why UNIDIR was established.

According to the findings of the assessment, UNIDIR is a valued resource and the institution provides a range of services that are recognized and appreciated. But as the assessment also points out, UNIDIR’s sustainability rests on shaky foundations and the Institute is limited in its ability to respond nimbly to new developments or requests. The Secretary-General thus proposes a range of measures to put UNIDIR on a stable and sustainable path. In so doing he looks to all stakeholders to contribute to this effort.
He calls first on UNIDIR to put in place measures to strengthen and enhance the credibility and quality of its work. The proposed changes to UNIDIR’s working methods include:

- developing and communicating a strategic research agenda;
- moving from single donor projects to multi-year research programmes;
- establishing partnerships to attract diverse research talent;
- expanding its donor base; and
- pursuing a nimbler and more efficient cost structure.

Second, he calls on the Institute’s Board of Trustees, the Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, to visibly engage on and support the strategic research agenda, thereby bolstering UNIDIR’s profile and outreach. On behalf of the Secretary-General, I thank the Board for its governance of the Institute and the close attention that the Board has played to this latest consideration of UNIDIR’s financing and operating model.

Third, the Secretary-General tasks the Secretariat to streamline its financial and administrative processes so as to ensure that the cost-reimbursable support that UNIDIR receives is efficient and effective, in line with wider management reforms.

Fourth, the Secretary-General reiterates the call that the General Assembly has made for Member States to make concerted efforts to:

- contribute voluntary funds to UNIDIR;
- limit earmarking of funds for specific project activities;
- move to multi-year, programmatic funding arrangements, as many Member States have done in other areas, including elsewhere in the UN peace and security pillar; and
- provide in-kind support to UNIDIR to facilitate disarmament outreach and knowledge-sharing beyond Geneva.
Fifth, the assessment recommends that UNIDIR’s institutional tasks – undertaken by a proposed core staff of six at an estimated cost of around USD $1.8 million – be funded from the Regular Budget. The Secretary-General is clear-eyed about today’s budgetary realities and does not support this recommendation. Instead, he encourages Member States to consider a more modest ‘top-up’ in Regular Budget-funding for UNIDIR to carry out the core functions set out in its Statute:

1) independent and accountable Institute leadership; [Director funding]

2) transparent and efficient stewardship of resources [funding of admin post]

3) support to the informed participation of all Member States in disarmament deliberations [funding for quarterly briefings to MS]

4) promotion of knowledge, ideas and dialogue on disarmament [funding for at least three events in non-OECD countries].

Some of these steps are already in train and the Chair of the Board or the Director of UNIDIR are available to brief on them. While I am happy to provide further details on figures, I hope that our discussion this afternoon can focus first, on what the membership value and are willing to consider providing support to an autonomous disarmament research institution.

I hope that we could explore concrete ways of taking forward the recommendation of the Independent Assessment, as well as those set out in the report of the Secretary-General. Most of these actions do not require legislative action. However, proposals with regard to the Regular Budget do require General Assembly approval. I realize that is not the mandate of this Committee to discuss detailed budget and financial matters. However, as the Secretariat begins preparations of proposals for the now annual 2020 Regular Budget submission, a signal from this Committee on the UNIDIR subvention will be a critical element in Secretariat as well as General Assembly budgetary bodies’ considerations and can help us in making progress on this longstanding issue.

Thank you for your time this afternoon. I look forward to our discussion.