Statement by Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev
Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and
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"Exchange with the High Representative for
Disarmament Affairs and other high-level officials in
the field of arms control and disarmament"

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United Nations Headquarters, New York
Monday, 15 October 2012
Mr. Chairman
Madam High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
Distinguished Panellists
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I appreciate the opportunity to address the First Committee in this high-level exchange.

The First Committee has a unique role in the United Nations disarmament architecture as its main legislative body. I appreciate that this year, the Committee's work again focuses to a great extent on the multilateral disarmament activities in Geneva, which form an integral part of the multilateral process for a safer and more secure world.

As Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Conference, I will focus on the current situation in the CD today.

I doubt that anyone in this room is unaware of the fundamentals of the current state of play in the CD. Unfortunately, those fundamentals have remained the same for many years now. Ambassador Hellmut Hoffmann, the outgoing President of the Conference, will introduce the report of the Conference next week during the thematic cluster on the disarmament machinery, and I will not go into its details today.

I share the view of an overwhelming majority of both members and non-members of the CD that the situation is unacceptable. It is a view also strongly and eloquently expressed by the Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon and successive Presidents of the General Assembly. The annual reports of the Conference cannot mask the stagnation in what should serve the international community as its single standing multilateral disarmament negotiating forum.

The reasons for the impasse in the CD are primarily political. They do not result from any one single fundamental flaw in the design of the Conference.

But, the reasons behind the impasse do not make it any less unacceptable. It delays, one long and potentially productive year at a time, the start of negotiations to strengthen our common security. It paralyzes what is still a formidable body of human
resources and expertise in the area of disarmament in Geneva. It exacerbates divisions, and leads the international community to collectively miss opportunities for a safer and more secure world that may present themselves.

As the Secretary-General's Personal Representative in Geneva, I am concerned that the strengths of the Geneva disarmament community are not used to their full potential for the international community. The Geneva agenda brings together a unique mix of disarmament, humanitarian, human rights and other issues. It is an asset that has to be used in the service of a better world for all.

Distinguished Delegates:
We live through a time of transformation and transition. The world is changing. I firmly believe that in the long run, the dynamics in the CD can also change, enabling it overcome the state of paralysis.

However, this requires the kind of political will that is currently not there. As in the case of climate change, this kind of crisis of multilateralism can have existential consequences for humankind. Continuously waiting for progress cannot be an option.

It was against this background that I earlier this year presented a number of practical proposals aimed at injecting new ideas into the Conference, for the consideration of the membership. I believe that in addition to increased political engagement to advance the substantive agenda, which must be our first priority, concrete steps to improve the functioning of the Conference can also be politically significant as a demonstration of the membership’s collective will to chart a way out of the impasse and can help to build trust.

Last year, this esteemed Committee sent a message of urgency to the Conference on Disarmament. A year later, we have not advanced. If progress in the CD repeatedly eludes us – one annual session at a time – what should the international community do? Would that leave no other option but to circumvent the Conference, to try another avenue?
As I have stated earlier this year, if any such efforts are carried out, they should complement the CD. They should make it more, not less, likely that negotiations are eventually resumed in the Conference. The international community needs a standing negotiating forum in the area of disarmament. If the CD is undermined or dismantled it will be very difficult – if not impossible – to replace it.

I appreciate that none of the drafts currently circulating in this Committee profess to squarely sideline the CD. All would leave its mandate and its session intact. In the area of nuclear disarmament a like-minded forum can go only so far. The international community needs a forum where different views and interests can meet to find common ground, even when it takes time.

Dear Colleagues:

We must continue to keep in mind what is at stake. Disarmament and non-proliferation are the cornerstones of a safer and more secure future for all of us. Disarmament is also linked to broader efforts for development and progress. According to some estimates, last year, global military spending reportedly exceeded 1.7 trillion US dollars. As the Secretary-General stressed in an opinion piece in August of this year, this represents human opportunities lost. The stakes could not be higher.

Genuine and meaningful multilateralism does require willingness to compromise. It calls for self-restraint and a mindset which is able to see one’s own security best served through the reinforcement of collective security. Only then is it possible to enter into a virtuous cycle of strengthening the rule of law in disarmament.

The responsibility that comes with working on disarmament is great. Throughout the multilateral disarmament machinery, we need to show to the world that we take that responsibility seriously by delivering on the mandates that are entrusted to us.

Nowhere is this more urgent than in the Conference on Disarmament.

Thank you very much for your attention.