Statement

Thematic discussion on Nuclear Weapons

AUSTRIA

delivered by

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Mr Chairman,

thank you very much.

Let me start by congratulating ICAN for being awarded the Nobel Peace Price 2017. We are delighted by this decision. It is a recognition of ICAN’s crucial role in raising awareness of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and in bringing about the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. At a moment when the danger of a use of NW is unfortunately more present than has been for many years, this is an important signal. Austria will continue its close cooperation with ICAN to advance towards the universalisation and entry into force of the TPNW as quickly as possible, as a contribution to our shared goal of a world free from nuclear weapons.

Mr Chairman,

Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are top foreign policy concerns of my country. The current crisis around the DPRK’s nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, to which we have already referred during the General Debate, has moved the issues even higher up our list of priorities.

It will soon be fifty years since the fundamental international norm, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, has been in force. Austria believes that the NPT has been an extraordinarily important success. Without it, international peace and security would be still much more precarious. We would be faced with even more nuclear weapons and even more actors possessing them.

On the other hand, the situation could also be much better. Proliferation could have ceased long ago and the nuclear possessor States could have given up their nuclear weapons, or at least they could have started serious and steady movement towards this goal. Will nuclear disarmament by the NPT’s big anniversary in 2020 have progressed to bring within reach a world free from nuclear weapons, the aspiration of the treaty? This is unfortunately difficult to believe. Even the more modest objective to keep the number of States possessing nuclear weapons down at five has not been attained.

In this period of ongoing geopolitical realignment, the States currently possessing nuclear weapons seem to be even less prepared to disarm, and one State even more eager to acquire these weapons. In view of these serious challenges, it is urgent that we reinvigorate the NPT and bring it back on track towards the realisation of its double objective. For this, however, States Parties must be prepared to do more than just defend, in a spirit of complacency, the nuclear status quo.
Mr Chairman,

It is the great achievement of the broad international discussion about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons of recent years that it promoted awareness and deepened understanding of the risks and dangers of these most horrific weapons, at a time when the concrete threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes still did not make headlines. As long as nuclear arms exist, their humanitarian consequences must remain high on the international agenda. This is why we [together with COSPONSORS] decided to table this year again the dedicated draft resolution, reiterating all elements of last year's resolution 71/46 with only technical updates.

The discussions about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons became the catalyst for a political and diplomatic process, culminating in the adoption of the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons by 122 States on July 7, 2017. The TPNW closes a gap by establishing a legal prohibition for the only category of WMD not yet outlawed. Such a prohibition is a necessary foundation as well as a stimulus for future further steps towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. This year’s “Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations” resolution that we together with the many cosponsors have tabled builds upon last year’s homonymous resolution 71/258, a number of substantive changes were made in order to take account of the significant developments which have taken place over the course of this year.

Austria and the co-sponsors invite all States to support these two draft resolutions and to consider co-sponsorship.

Mr. Chairman,

While the TPNW commands strong international support, nevertheless some States remain at a distance and have raised a number of questions and concerns both during discussions of this committee and outside of it. I would like to use this opportunity to react briefly to some of these issues.

As to the impact of the TPNW on the NPT and the international non-proliferation regime built around it, we already said in our contribution to the General Debate that the new treaty is perfectly consistent with the NPT, which it strengthens and partially implements. Specifically, the TPNW contains a reaffirmation of the NPT’s role as the cornerstone of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. It reaffirms prohibitions in place already in the NPT and establishes a way for nuclear armed States to meet their obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament under article VI. As to IAEA safeguards, the TPNW requires States to maintain as a minimum what each of them has in place today, meaning in the majority of cases a comprehensive safeguards agreement plus an additional protocol, amounting even to a higher standard than stipulated by the NPT.
Another issue is verification. Here it is important to bear in mind that the TPNW does reaffirm verification as an essential principle of any concrete nuclear disarmament measure. Given the choice of the nuclear weapon possessors not to participate in the negotiations, however, it was decided reasonably not to flesh out the details at this stage, but rather to provide space to include the input of nuclear armed States to develop concrete verification measures once they join the treaty.

Sometimes it is argued that the TPNW will not lead to the elimination even of one single nuclear weapon, because no nuclear armed State is going to join. The validity of this assumption about the future is of course beyond proof. By that logic, should the NPT be regarded as a failure by not having prevented non-members from acquiring nuclear weapons? Certainly such an assumption is not a valid excuse for nuclear weapon possessors not to join. Suffice that any one of them actually joined and the assumption would eo ipso be proven wrong. This notwithstanding, the argument misses the essential point that the establishment of a legal prohibition is important in itself as a necessary basis for future elimination.

Discussions in the NPT framework have never since 1970 been particularly easy, due to well known and longstanding differences of views of individual States Parties. As a consequence, past NPT review consequences have often not been able to agree on a consensual outcome document. The underlying divisions have nothing to do with the TPNW and will not be further deepened by it, as some seem to fear. Discussions at the latest NPT PrepCom, which took place between the TPNW negotiating sessions, were even rather more constructive than at the RevCon in 2015 for example.

Mr Chairman,

We hear that the TPNW delegitimises nuclear deterrence and thereby undermines security. In our view, the first part of this thesis is as correct, as the second is wrong. Already from the formal point of view, it is not plausible to assume that the TPNW can possibly undermine the security of a State which chooses not to join it but rather to continue to rely on nuclear deterrence.

And of course there is also the material question what nuclear deterrence means for security in the first place. Nothing good, as Austria and the supporters of the TPNW believe. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons imply that any failure of nuclear deterrence would be absolutely devastating. Unfortunately, for a variety of factors, the risk of nuclear war actually occurring has further increased recently. The crisis around the DPRK’s nuclear programme is a drastic illustration. Other serious risks include accidents, cyber-attacks or terrorism related to nuclear weapons. The Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists currently stands at two and a half minutes to midnight. We are balancing at the edge of an abyss. So it is urgent that we finally move on from the Cold War concept of mutual assured destruction as the illusionary warrant for the security of ourselves, our children and grandchildren. By contributing to this necessary transition the TPNW, far from undermining security, actually strengthens it.
Mr Chairman,

In the coming months, Austria will continue to encourage States to sign and ratify the TPNW so that the instrument can enter into force as soon as possible. This includes a desire to continue and intensify dialogue also with those currently not in favour of the new treaty. We feel that there is still a lack of knowledge and a degree of misconception which can and should be removed. Even those currently not prepared to join should be able to appreciate that the TPNW is a contribution to making the world a safer and more secure place for everybody without exception.

To conclude, we have always said that the TPNW is an important step towards nuclear disarmament, but that in order to achieve and maintain a nuclear weapon free world, many other steps will have to be taken. Austria will therefore continue to pay close attention also to these other issues, such as entry into force of the CTBT, start of negotiations on a fissile material cutoff treaty, further work on nuclear disarmament verification, or other items listed in the NPT 2010 Action Plan, and possibly new initiatives. There is reason for hope that the positive momentum created by the TPNW will stimulate progress also on other fronts, so that by 2020 we will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the NPT more positively, than it is possible today.

I thank you.