Thank you Mr President. My delegation wishes you well as you assume the important task of launching substantive work in this forum. We welcome the Russian Ambassador and all other newly arrived Ambassadors to the Conference on Disarmament. We welcome the sense of urgency that you are bringing to your duties as evidenced by your recent non-paper, by your ongoing consultations on a possible programme of work, and indeed by your working paper CD/1929 which was distributed yesterday.

It is very clear, Mr President, that you and your successors to the Presidency for 2012 need no reminding of the degree of international concern surrounding the future of this body. The most recent session of the UN General Assembly can have left little doubt about how pivotal this year will be for the CD.

At the centre of the First Committee’s work last October was a high level of concern about the state of the multilateral disarmament machinery and particularly the Conference on Disarmament. This was made clear in a number of draft resolutions.

We commend the UN Secretary-General for all the efforts he has made to draw attention to this worrying situation. The Secretary-General’s statement last week – as conveyed to us by Secretary General Tokayev – sets out clearly the Secretary General’s concerns about the ongoing deadlock in the Conference and the need to overcome this without any further delay. As you note in your working paper, the foundations of the Conference are being “gravely eroded by its continued failure to achieve results”.

Delegations here are well aware of the General Assembly’s adoption, without a vote, of the resolution tabled by the Netherlands, South Africa and Switzerland during the last session of the UNGA. That resolution, naturally enough, urged this Conference to adopt and implement a programme of work. But the Assembly went on to resolve that at its next annual session, i.e. later this year, it would “review progress made in the implementation of the present resolution and, if necessary, to further explore options for taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations”.

New Zealand understands these words to be putting the CD on notice. It has been given the breathing space of one year in which to begin to make substantive progress – by which we mean the actual, or at the very least imminent, undertaking of negotiations of the kind that the General Assembly long ago mandated us to carry out.

Mr President, your working paper questions whether we may be unduly fixated on the importance of this body carrying out negotiations. But to my mind, it is this which is the rationale for our existence. Talk-shops exist a-plenty. Some – such as the Disarmament Commission - are indeed UN mandated. The Conference’s value-add has always lain in the prospect (increasingly theoretical, I agree) that it would settle the terms of legally-binding undertakings to move international security forward.
Mr President, my delegation has been concerned for some time now not only with the CD’s inability to perform in the manner expected of it by the General Assembly, but also by the manner in which we have complicated our efforts to find a way forward by allowing each issue to be held hostage to another.

We either need to de-link the mandates - or accept that the current means of proceeding is to consign the fissile material treaty, nuclear disarmament and the other core CD issues to deadlock in perpetuity.

My delegation nostalgically recalls the situation in 1998 when this forum’s approach to the programme of work was more pragmatic and we were able to agree two separate negotiating mandates - one on fissile material and the other on negative security assurances. New Zealand – at that time a new member – had great hopes that we would soon participate in meaningful negotiations which would carry forward the international security agenda. Regretfully those hopes remain unfulfilled.

We have heard it said in this Chamber that the CD does not operate in a vacuum untouched by the international security environment. Mr President, if this is so, it can equally be asserted that the CD does not operate in a vacuum untouched by the views of member states represented in the UN General Assembly. The UNGA has made its views abundantly clear: the issues before the Conference are of the utmost importance to our collective security. If we cannot meet the UNGA membership’s overwhelming desire for progress on the items on the CD’s agenda then the GA will consider future options.

We have heard it suggested that because the CD is not unanimous regarding the launch of negotiations on a fissile material treaty the Conference should instead take up negotiations on other issues on its agenda. Your working paper of 30 January, Mr President, also touches on this point.

While we recognise an element of pragmatism to this suggestion, the unacceptable result of it would be that the wishes, security interests, and priority identified by the vast majority of CD members would be ignored - and supplanted instead by the viewpoint and security interest of the few.

Such an outcome would be as unfair here as in any other multilateral context. It works against the very basis of multilateralism and the search for global solutions of any sort.

It is unrealistic to urge the overwhelming majority of us to abandon the priority we attach to negotiating a treaty on fissile material. But equally we do have to concede that it has, to date, proved unrealistic - given the consensus requirement in our rules of procedure - simply to repeat the call to begin such negotiations.
My delegation has maintained its support for the Shannon mandate now for over 15 years. We appreciate its subtlety, including the framing it gives for any delegation to raise for consideration issues including the appropriate scope of the eventual fissile material treaty. We have yet to hear anything, however, that suggests to us that this mandate will provide the basis for a launch this year of negotiations. That, clearly, is the view put forward in your working paper as well, Mr President.

Perhaps now is the time, in this last year of breathing space, for all of us to consider again CD resolution 1299 and identify what flexibility we might have to build on its language in a way that enables us to bridge differences and move forward to begin substantive work on this important issue. If that flexibility eludes us, we – or the General Assembly – will be able to draw the inevitable conclusion about the future of this forum.

We appreciate, Mr President, your intention to hold a series of frank and honest discussions about the future of this body. We do hope that you will find that there is the requisite flexibility and a general readiness on the part of all delegations, in the words of UNGA resolution 66/66, to “adopt and implement a programme of work to enable [us] to resume substantive work on [our] agenda early in the 2012 session”.

If we can do this then there is ground for hope that the CD will recognize, as it has in the past, that it should have an integral part to play in changing the international security environment. If it cannot then, as we have said before, it will be preferable to put the CD into mothballs until such time as there is a greater convergence of views regarding the negotiations to be carried out in this body. Alternatively, Mr President, as you suggest, the CD could meet each year for a shorter period of time until agreement on a programme of work is possible.

While it remains the strong desire of my delegation to negotiate within the CD, there are limits to the amount of time (and resource) that a small delegation such as New Zealand’s can commit at a time when the political climate is not conducive to progress.

Mr President, my delegation looks forward to this continuing “frank and honest discussion”. We welcome your ongoing efforts – and the creativity you have already displayed – in trying to get the Conference down to substantive work.

To this end you certainly have New Zealand’s support but I note that if the Conference is indeed going to be able to justify its existence to the General Assembly, the time in which to do so is clearly short.