STATEMENT on the Revitalisation of the Disarmament Machinery

By

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Mr President,

Revitalisation of the UN disarmament machinery is our topic today but I hope that you and colleagues will allow me to blend in some personal reflections as I complete four years in Geneva. I have been privileged to experience tremendous achievements in multilateral work – notably the action plan from the NPT Review Conference in 2010, and then the historic Arms Trade Treaty earlier this year. I was there at the beginning of the new consultation process among the five Nuclear Weapons States in 2009, a process which I believe has the potential to take us steadily along the path to nuclear zero. But I have also shared the frustrations of many, as the Conference on Disarmament prevented the entire NPT membership from fulfilling all aspects of our 2010 Action Plan.

Mr President

After many years of stalemate, it is tempting to give up hope and to seek new and seemingly easier paths to disarmament, paths which have the feel-good factor that comes from the company of the like-minded and control of the agenda. I understand and respect those who day in and day out show tremendous drive and energy in the pursuit of nuclear disarmament. But my simple question is whether efforts outside the CD, without the participation of those possessing nuclear weapons, will result in the practical dismantlement of nuclear weapons which we all seek. My predecessor, a wise man, used to tell me that “you can’t just legislate for security”. Saying that something is to be banned does not remove it from arsenals in one stroke.

Yet this difference of opinion does not mean that we cannot find common ground here in the CD. We can at least do some of the homework which will be needed to assemble the building blocks which will underpin real and complete nuclear disarmament. We may disagree on the sequencing for some steps, such as a nuclear weapons convention, but no-one disputes that such a convention will be needed as a final step. But if we are to do meaningful work here in the CD in Geneva, then we must give ourselves permission to work differently.

Mr President

Any meaningful discussion of revitalisation should look at the links between difference elements of the UN disarmament machinery. There were meant to be organic links between the UN Disarmament Commission, the First Committee and the Conference on Disarmament. Simply put, UNDC discusses, First Committee mandates, the CD negotiates. As I said in a statement last year, those links have been broken in recent years. But there is nothing to stop us beginning each CD year with a review of the numerous resolutions which we have passed, debating (quickly) the reasons why we can or cannot begin to negotiate on the issue. I believe that such a process helped to produce CD 1864 back in 2009. That document identified the one core issue on which we were all prepared to begin negotiations at the CD. To those who seek to undermine the CD’s recent history or to devalue CD 1864, I say that everyone is entitled to their own opinion but not to their own facts. The fact is that CD 1864 was adopted by consensus. It was adopted in this chamber. Subsequent events
outside of the CD made 1864 less palatable for one member, but perhaps the best place to resolve those issues is also outside of the CD.

Mr President

Coming back to the present, my delegation believes that the raison d’etre of the CD is to negotiate. Not to discuss four or seven core issues ad infinitum but to pick one which can enjoy consensus, as we did in CD1864, and to get started. The Arms Trade Treaty is testament to what can be achieved when we choose the protection of negotiations by consensus. FMCT negotiations in the CD would offer the same strategic protection. In the end, we were forced to take the ATT back to UNGA, but let us not forget that the hard work on the text and the late nights were done under a consensus mandate. That mandate gave many exporter states the protection they needed to be part of the UN process. I know that is an inconvenient truth but it is the truth. So I don’t accept the argument that consensus need always be a recipe for stagnation.

Mr President

How we interact in the CD is an area which deserves as much attention as the consensus rule. Switzerland and others have come forward with ideas today. It is unnecessary to continue with formulaic statements week after week, rehearsing old positions. Perhaps that’s what I’m doing now. But I’d happily debate with every one of you in a more interactive manner. All we need is the permission to do so and a volunteer to lead the session. As President John F Kennedy said 50 years ago yesterday, if we cannot overcome our differences, let us at least make the world safe for diversity.

Everyone is entitled to make the case for a particular core issue. I’d like here and now to reiterate the case for focussing on the FMCT. It is one of the building blocks that will underpin global zero. The five NPT Nuclear Weapons States have repeatedly made clear that we are all ready to proceed to negotiation. None of the other core issues enjoys that complete support from all of the five. If we need to wait a little longer to start work in the CD, then at least Canada has set in train a process which can do the groundwork. Many Member States submitted their views on a FMCT to the UN in New York in the middle of last month. The UN is now compiling a report of all contributions and will be placing full copies of all submissions on their website. The submissions are aimed at setting the parameters for discussion in the Group of Government Expert. Many states included views on what a FMCT could look like. This issue and the response at the UN shows that the call for an FMCT has gone beyond rhetoric and theory.

Mr President

Soon I will be back at university trying to make sense of it all. I have much to learn but I have also learned a lot from being in this post. In the ATT, I have learned that a good idea can spread like wildfire. But that being popular is not enough. You must persuade people that the idea is practical, that it will not cut across their own interests or that the benefits to them outweigh the risks.
Other things I have learned are that: the disarmament community in Geneva is long-suffering and kind - they will point out nicely when you have misquoted the British position, that we have a very talented group from civil society who are good at putting together little videos to highlight the absurdity of multilateral life; that media work is not glamorous but involves being locked in a small cupboard staring into bright lights seeking enlightenment from afar – a bit like the CD, I suppose.

Now let me end on a serious note. I haven’t given up on the CD because I think it is possible to find a way between an out and out ban on nuclear weapons, as some are seeking, and the stalemate we currently face. Step by step is not a dirty word. It’s what took the UK from over 400 warheads in 1978, to less than 160 now. That’s a reduction of 65%. Not enough of course but we are definitely moving in the right direction. Perhaps one small step for the CD as we wait desperately to begin negotiations could be for us to identify together each of the steps or conditions which will be needed to underpin comprehensive nuclear disarmament. We will probably disagree on the sequencing. But we could at least begin to rebuild some of the trust which has eroded inside the CD and in the international community. If you like the idea but you can’t do it here, drop me a line at Harvard. I might even write a paper about it.

A huge thank you to all, my colleagues, my friends, my sparring partners. I will miss you.

Thank you Mr President.