Remarks to the Conference on Disarmament

By

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H.E. Mr. Zebari, Ambassador Ismail, Mr. Tokayev, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

I very much welcome this opportunity to address the Conference on Disarmament. My own memories of the work of the Conference date back many years before my appointment as the United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, when I worked in the former Department for Disarmament Affairs. Although the times have certainly changed—the Soviet Union still existed then and the Cold War was in its last years—the institution of the Conference on Disarmament remains today as important as ever.

We who work at the United Nations continue to respect the vitally important role the CD plays in the negotiation of multilateral legal obligations in the field of disarmament. When one hears of strengthening the “rule of law” in disarmament, it is hard not to think of this institution.

Making laws in this difficult field of disarmament is, not surprisingly, a very time-consuming process, sometimes agonizingly so. Yet this is a simple reality that is not much different in other legislative arenas. International law tends to develop incrementally in response to events and its very permanence and obligatory character quite naturally leads States to be careful in adopting new legal norms, which often entails a long diplomatic process. And in the words of former U.S. Under Secretary of State, Thomas Pickering, who is also the Permanent Representative to the United Nations “diplomacy isn’t instant coffee”.

While recognizing this unavoidable fact of diplomatic life, the public and many Member States both of this institution and throughout the United Nations are justified in voicing their frustration over the failure of the CD to fulfil its mandate as the world’s “single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum”. These frustrations have given rise to real doubts about whether the CD is still capable of performing this function, given the stalemate that it has been unable to break due to chronic differences over priorities and over the scope of application of its consensus rule. This impasse, year after year, has led many to propose the establishment of alternative negotiating areas. And the longer the stalemate exists, the greater will be the temptation to pursue those options.

Personally, I would not welcome such a development, because I value very highly both the multilateral dimensions of disarmament norms, as well as the goal of ensuring that these norms are fully universal in scope. Treaties agreed by coalitions of States can achieve marvellous things—they can contribute both to international and to regional security, no doubt about that. But where they fall short is in producing universal consent and this is a vital element of any arrangement or treaty that seeks to achieve a true disarmament goal. When we talk of the elimination of a certain class of weaponry, we
have to be talking about eliminating it everywhere, not just somewhere. There really can be no other meaning of the term.

It would follow that consent and consensus are not mere inconveniences, but essential elements in forging a disarmament norm that is truly universal in scope. Yet what we are seeing today goes far beyond the issue of achieving consensus on universal norms. We are seeing this great institution—the Conference on Disarmament—functionally immobilized by what might be called a “my-priorities-first” approach to diplomacy that, if not altered, will jeopardize its very existence as a vital component of the United Nations disarmament machinery. Where flexibility and compromise are necessary, we are seeing intransigence and the transformation of national negotiating positions into immovable objects. And I am not here addressing any particular member State since the dispute over priorities has now become almost endemic to the CD.

Every member of the Conference is unquestionably committed to pursuing global nuclear disarmament and many other shared multilateral disarmament goals. Yet the common ground shared by all members has not yet produced the progress that is most urgently needed in commencing negotiations. The net result of the current impasse is a de facto ratification of the status quo, which most of the world views as simply unacceptable.

Some might say that real progress in disarmament must first await the resolution of political disputes between key States, in particular those with the largest arsenals. Such a view, however, ignores the many contributions that progress in disarmament can make in building mutual trust and confidence between States. We all know that disarmament is not done out of philanthropy alone—it is widely recognized as a highly effective and reliable means to enhance national security and to strengthen international peace and security overall.

Disarmament is a security policy. Real insecurity follows from the lack of disarmament. And the lack of negotiations on disarmament is also most regrettable, because it signifies the lack of will even to explore ways of confronting and overcoming disarmament’s many challenges.

I would therefore like today to implore all members of the Conference to heed the advice you have received repeatedly in person from Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to resume the productive work of this distinguished institution. There is history to be made in acting, and the time to act is now.

Thank you Mr. President.