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Thematic Discussion on Nuclear Weapons

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Mr. Chairman

1. In Austria’s view, nuclear weapons pose one of the gravest danger and key challenge for the international community. Their continued possession by some states is a key driver for the quest for nuclear weapons by others. Their alleged contribution towards stability – mutual deterrence – is an unconvincing relict of the past, the risks of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists and the unimaginable humanitarian, environmental, health and economic consequences of nuclear weapons renders them unusable weapons and an immoral concept for the conduct of international relations. The international community of civilized states in the 21st century must find a way to deal with this challenge. Our inability, thus far, to make real headway in overcoming the perception that nuclear weapons are a “valuable strategic tool” and “power symbol” rather than deeply immoral is at the core of this challenge.

2. Last year, at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, all States Parties committed to pursue policies that are fully compatible with the Treaty and the objective of a world without nuclear weapons. The action plan on nuclear disarmament affirms that all States need to make special efforts to establish the necessary framework to achieve and maintain a world without nuclear weapons. It notes the five-point proposal for nuclear disarmament of the Secretary General of the United Nations, which proposes, inter alia, consideration of negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention or agreement on a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments backed by a strong system of verification. Austria would like to underscore the importance of placing the prospect of such a legal framework on the international disarmament agenda.

3. The fact that an agreement was possible in 2010 provided a little respite for the NPT, whose credibility, however, remains challenged on all fronts. This is all on borrowed time only. The commitments agreed to in 2010 need to be implemented by all NPT States Parties without delay. This requires tangible and credible progress in this NPT Review Cycle. We look forward to NPT State Parties convening in Vienna next year for the first NPT Preparatory Committee. This will provide an opportunity to focus particularly on Vienna-based issues where the IAEA provides such an important contribution to the implementation of the NPT. Its pivotal role on non-proliferation and nuclear safety and security needs to be reinforced and strengthened, both in light of the troubling proliferation challenges on the agenda in Vienna and the urgent need for serious reflection in the wake of the Fukushima/Daichi disaster about the potentially devastating risks inherent in any use of nuclear energy.

4. Vienna is also host to the CTBTO PrepCom, which has a crucial role to play in developing the effective nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime
that we seek. The CTBT is therefore of key relevance for all three pillars of the NPT. We welcome the declared commitment of Indonesia and the United States to move towards ratification of the CTBT and hope that these announcements will be followed up as soon as possible. Moreover, we urge the other remaining of Annex II states to use the opportunity to show global disarmament and non-proliferation leadership by ratifying the CTBT without delay.

5. Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation depend on a strong verification regime. The IAEA continues to expand and to strengthen its safeguards system. The CTBT continues to build its capacities. Both agencies have demonstrated over and over again that verification works and that multilateral institutions are highly effective in this respect due to their impartiality and their multilateral legitimacy. However, the legal framework for effective verification must, in the case of the CTBT, enter into force and, in the case of the IAEA, be further strengthened.

6. The 2012 Conference on a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East, is an integral and decisive part of the consensus reached at the NPT Review Conference last year. It is important that this process is put on a credible track and that all stakeholders approach this process with a sincere mindset of wanting to make progress. This is of utmost importance not only to the countries in the region but to the entire NPT membership and, indeed, the international community at large. We are therefore delighted that Finland has been nominated as facilitator and host country for this important process. We would like to wish Finland well for this challenging endeavour. Austria sincerely hopes that, after the constructive spirit that prevailed at the General Conference of the IAEA in Vienna, the IAEA Forum on a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in the Middle East in November 2011 will provide another positive impetus to that process.

7. The Security Council affirmed in its Resolution 1540 that proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, as well as their means of delivery, constitutes a threat to international peace and security. From our perspective, the interface between nuclear safety and nuclear security is as important as the interrelatedness between nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. In this field, the Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation plays a key role. The number of Subscribing States has been constantly growing during the last decade and currently stands at 134. The fact that already more than two thirds of the UN membership subscribed to the Code corroborates its relevance as a tool of information exchange and confidence building. We encourage the remaining UN members to consider acceding to the Code in the future.
8. The General Debate has in our view again demonstrated the worrying state of affairs of our discourse on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. We are stuck up in procedural discussions, are largely lacking focus on the urgency of actually making progress on substance and repeat old positions over and over again. Unfortunately, many other statements and apparent dogmas that were heard again in this Committee and elsewhere for many years ring hollow. Yet, we all seem to agree that we are in fact dealing with issues that need to be addressed with great urgency. So why are we unable to break out of our state of inertia and open our discourse up for new approaches to enable progress on the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation?

9. The prime example of this debate is about the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva – the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum – tasked to negotiate disarmament treaties. Our delegation would fully subscribe to this frequently quoted description rooted in OP 120 of the 1978 Final Document of SSOD I if it still were true. However, after a blockade of one and a half decades, the CD appears to have been reduced to a forum where multilateral engagement on disarmament matters can be pretended safely and without consequences and any substantive progress. Let me stress that the responsibility for this lies not only with nuclear weapons states or nuclear capable states but with the entire membership.

10. Fact is the CD has been unable to deliver on its mandate for 15 years now. Over this period, the responsibility for blocking progress or ensuring that the CD discourse remains on unproductive and purely dogmatic grounds has been shared by a variety of actors. At least from our perspective, there seems to be a shared determination by too many stakeholders to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. So far, this approach has been successful. The “silent majority” complains about and laments the state of affairs and appeals for change, but there have been no real consequences. Unless the international community coalesces around a much more determined course of action, the inertia will continue and any meaningful multilateral disarmament process will continue to elude us for a very long time. Can the political will around a determined and constructive way forward that breaks the stalemate be mustered? This is, indeed, the big question that we ask ourselves also after listening to the General Debate. Austria, together with Mexico and Norway, has presented a draft resolution on “Taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations” that, in our view, identifies such a credible and constructive path ahead. We look forward to exploring and discussing this approach with all states truly interested in moving forward on substance.

Thank you