66th Session of the UN General Assembly
First Committee

Thematic Discussion on the Disarmament Machinery

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Check against delivery
The revitalisation of the disarmament machinery is imperative. I would like to briefly outline our thinking, and – more importantly – the initiative we have been undertaking together with Mexico and Norway. While addressing the General Assembly in the General Debate on 24 September 2011, Foreign Minister Spindelegger announced that Austria would encourage a resolution on how to move forward multilateral disarmament negotiations. This resolution is the third in a row introduced by my delegation in the First Committee since the adoption of work programme CD/1864.

- In 2009, as President of the Conference on Disarmament, my delegation introduced and negotiated Resolution 64/64 on the Report of the Conference on Disarmament, which welcomed the consensus adoption of a programme of work. While CD/1864 remains for most of us the gold standard for a balanced and comprehensive programme of work, its non-implementation also demonstrates the inability of the CD to fulfil its mandate set out by SSOD I – the actual negotiation of disarmament treaties.

- In 2010, following the High-Level Meeting convened by the Secretary-General, we introduced and negotiated Resolution 65/93 on revitalising the Conference on Disarmament and taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations. While the debate held by the General Assembly on this issue in July this year clearly demonstrated the overwhelming sense of urgency to overcome the current stalemate in the disarmament machinery, it did not result in concrete proposals how to tackle this challenge.

- This year, together with Mexico and Norway, we therefore introduced draft resolution A/C.1/66/L.21 on taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations, containing a concrete proposal to be considered by the General Assembly at its session next year. Before presenting this resolution more in detail, let me briefly mention our general approach.

Like others, Austria agrees that the CD is the designated multilateral forum for disarmament negotiations. I may recall that Austria was among the P6 when CD/1864 was negotiated, and we particularly endeavored to render this work programme as balanced as possible, taking account of the different priorities attributed to various items on the CD agenda. We will continue to do our utmost to contribute to breaking the stalemate in the CD. However, since joining the CD in 1996, Austria has never seen one day of substantive negotiations there. After one and a half decades of paralysis it is becoming increasingly clear that the CD may be unable to live up to its mandate as agreed upon at SSOD I.

In this context, let me emphasise that SSOD I mandated the CD to negotiate disarmament treaties, not to prevent the negotiation of such treaties. This is, unfortunately, how the CD appears today. Many analyses have been made as regards the current impasse. Let me try to change the narrative – from what we are being told to what we hear.

- We are being told that a lack of political will prevents the CD from fulfilling its core task – to negotiate disarmament treaties. What we hear, however, is an abundance of political will by a vast majority to negotiate.

- We are being told that the consensus rule is indispensable to protect the security interests of a few members of the CD. What we hear, however, is that the consensus rule should not serve to prevent the beginning of negotiations of what might eventually become legal instruments. Needless to say, the decision about acceding to such legal instruments is a sovereign right of each and every state, irrespective of its being part of the CD or the NPT or both.
We are being told that security interests are at stake, as if the negotiation of disarmament treaties were a threat. It is particularly odd that this argument is used by states with nuclear weapons in their arsenals. What we hear, however, is that the negotiation of disarmament treaties increases the security of the international community at large, especially of the vast majority of states not possessing nuclear weapons.

In our view, the continued paralysis with respect to multilateral disarmament negotiations must be overcome urgently. The issues are too important to remain idle on our agenda for much longer. Fresh and innovative approaches therefore need to be considered on how progress on substance may be achievable. This may require breaking with some of the “dogmas” as well as a greater readiness to compromise.

Let me now briefly present our resolution: The draft resolution proposed by Austria together with Mexico and Norway is an attempt to encourage innovative thinking. This resolution is by no means an attempt to undermine the CD. Our track record during the last years is evidence of our commitment to the start of disarmament negotiations within the CD. Our proposal outlines an idea of establishing open ended working groups (in Geneva) on all issues currently blocked in the CD - for the duration of the CD paralysis. Its main focus is to stimulate a shift from our discussions on procedural issues (CD Programme of Work) to substantive disarmament negotiations. It maintains the careful balance of different priority issues, which is, in our view, necessary to garner broad support for any breakthrough on substance.

The resolution does not foresee any operational decision to be taken at this stage; rather, it suggests giving serious consideration to this proposal next year (67th GA), should the CD remain in paralysis. We will have to use all our efforts next year to bring the CD back to work. However, if this breakthrough continues to elude us, Austria is convinced that new approaches must be seriously considered. We see our proposal as a contribution to launching a broader discussion and we are open to all other innovative proposals that help us to move towards substantive disarmament negotiations.

Our draft resolution is intended as a constructive contribution. We already achieved one goal - to stimulate our debate and the dynamics necessary to revitalize the disarmament machinery. We realize that some delegations are at this stage skeptical of the ideas that we have outlined. Therefore, we are consulting broadly and in a transparent manner. We have listened very carefully to all comments made, especially also during the two rounds of informal consultations held last week. As a consequence, we have adapted the text and have prepared a revision of the draft resolution.

We appreciate the broad range of comments made on this draft resolution; comments facilitate our collective goal of substantially taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations. It is with this approach that we are asking all delegations to examine our proposal on the merits - from a dynamic perspective to reach this objective.

Thank you.