Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to join my distinguished colleagues from the disarmament community at this high-level panel in the framework of the First Committee during the 71st session of the General Assembly. I thank the Chairperson of the First Committee, H.E. Ambassador Sabri Boukadoum, and the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Mr. Kim Won-soo for their kind invitation to this important exchange.

The disarmament machinery is a prime example of an issue where New York and Geneva – the General Assembly and the Conference on Disarmament – are closely linked. Attending today’s discussions is therefore a priority for me in my capacity as Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament.

Let me start with a look at the current state of affairs in the field of arms control and disarmament through the Geneva-perspective: as you know, the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons all originated in the Conference on Disarmament or its predecessors. These treaties and conventions signified important progress.

However, as we all know, in more recent years, Geneva has no longer been associated with successful disarmament negotiations. Over the past twenty years of deadlock in the Conference on Disarmament, frustration turned into disillusionment. While many share my continued frustration with the deadlock, increasing attempts are being made to turn it into intensified efforts to revitalize discussions. While there has not yet been agreement on a programme of work, we have seen some innovative proposals by Member States.

We must use this renewed energy to make meaningful progress for disarmament because the urgency is becoming more insistent. The increasing reliance on nuclear weapons to convey messages is returning as a worrying element of foreign policy and security strategies around the world. This occurs in parallel to an alarming decrease in respect for the protection of civilians in various conflicts, including the use of chemical and other non-nuclear weapons. On top of these developments, the rapid technological advances – be it in lethal autonomous weapons, hypersonic missile technology, or the further perfection of nuclear weapons – have implications that the disarmament community has yet to fully grasp, let
alone address. These are clear warning signs and we need to act preventively, and we need to do so now!

Against this background, let me highlight a few trends and proposals that were made in the Conference on Disarmament over the course of the last year. On the substantive core issues, we have not seen much movement. The issue of a “treaty banning the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other explosive devices”, or FMCT, which has been part of the ongoing debates for the past two decades is still seen as most ‘ripe’ for negotiations. As discussions at the four nuclear security summits hosted by the United States since 2010 show, many States are concerned about, and have taken voluntary measures to, increase the security of civilian stockpiles of weapon-usable fissile materials. However, the vast majority of these materials have been accumulated through military production in weapon stockpiles. A FMCT has great potential to serve the objectives of nuclear security and could also serve as a tool to promote, within its scope, safety and security, as well as effective verification.

One important step in the efforts to revitalize multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations was the establishment of the Open Ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations in Geneva pursuant to Resolution 70/33. The discussions, summarized in its report of last August, added a new dimension to the deliberations on concrete effective legal measures, legal provisions and norms that would need to be concluded to attain and maintain a world free from nuclear weapons. This process is of great importance to the Conference on Disarmament. As the world’s single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum, it would be the natural place for eventual negotiations on a new treaty or convention, but this will, of course, ultimately be the decision of our Member States here and a robust discussion at your current session is expected.

There have also been discussions in the Conference on Disarmament this year on other emerging issues that are of concern to the international community. One example was the debate on the “suppression of acts of chemical and biological terrorism”. Terrorist attacks have occurred in various shapes and forms on all continents in recent times and fear of chemical, biological and nuclear attacks is growing. While Member States did not agree on the proposals regarding this issue, it points to the fact that the Conference on Disarmament continues to be a major forum to address current security challenges. We need to recreate an atmosphere and a structure in which proposals and counter-proposals are not just made to call out the other side, but to genuinely work towards a common understanding.

An issue on which progress is urgently needed is that of lethal autonomous weapons, which will also feature at the Fifth Review Conference of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons in December this year. As I mentioned earlier, there is a drive to develop ever more precise and supposedly “surgical” weapons that reduce human error. However, as we de-humanize the firing of weapons, the awareness of the pain and damage they continue to incur on humans, including
civilians, also appears to decline. This is a dangerous development and regulations need to be put in place.

There are various additional aspects related to the development of new technologies, including the weaponization of outer space and cyber warfare, all of which can have an impact on nuclear capabilities and safety. These are issues on which the international community has to move before positions and technologies become too entrenched. The desire to keep an apparent advantage over the other side has fueled the nuclear arms race for too long. The accelerated development of hypersonic weapons, which have such a destructive power that they do not even need a conventional warhead are a case in point. We really need to come to our senses and realize that there are no lasting advantages in these costly attempts to outpace others by developing ever more sophisticated and powerful tools to destroy entire societies and our planet.

Distinguished Delegates,

The topics I just mentioned illustrate some fundamental flaws in the current set-up of the Conference on Disarmament.

First and foremost, the narrow interpretation of consensus, namely unanimity, in the Conference on Disarmament is simply not practical. Consensus should leave room for diverging views on the details, in order to address these during negotiations. What we have at the moment is a situation in which a single Member State can block any form of substantive progress before negotiations have even begun, a de facto veto power for each of the 65 members of the Conference on Disarmament! This cannot function in a body where you have countries that start from very different political and armaments positions.

I also think that negotiations do not necessarily always have to be aimed at immediately concluding a legally binding treaty. There may be merit in concentrating on voluntary, politically binding, agreements first with the hope that these may later translate into legally binding disarmament instruments. A combination of side negotiations and flexibility on the mandate could help delegations to reach agreement. Consideration can also be given to scientific working groups to look at the required technical dimensions.

Secondly, the membership and possibilities for interaction of the Conference on Disarmament do not reflect the realities of multilateralism in the 21st century. The rules of procedure state that membership was to be reviewed at regular intervals, but this has not happened for quite a while. Expansion of the membership of the Conference needs to be considered. The need for addressing this issue was also mentioned in the recent Report of the Open-ended Working Group [A/71/371].

All major international agreements that have been negotiated recently, from climate change to sustainable development, benefitted greatly from civil society involvement. This also held true in the disarmament domain in the past, for example with respect to Anti-Personnel Mines.
continuing stalemate of the Conference on Disarmament is a source of disappointment to millions of people around the world and the Conference on Disarmament needs to adapt to changing global governance realities and start engaging with civil society in a structured and formal manner.

To this end, at the request of Member States of the Conference on Disarmament and civil society organizations I organized a second Informal CD-Civil Society Forum last June. The meeting showed, once again, that a more structured civil society engagement is of substantive benefit to both sides.

The UN Institute for Disarmament Research provides an important interface between academic research and disarmament practitioners and thereby provides important and useful tools to Member States. This includes a number of new projects the Institute has commenced this year, on nuclear or conventional weapons and emerging security issues. I am also happy to note that last year, the Institute managed to transition to a more stable institutional and administrative footing, made possible due to strong support from Member States, the UN’s senior management, and the continued efforts of the Institute’s dedicated staff. In order to enable UNIDIR to continue providing its independent and acknowledged wide-ranging expertise, I draw your attention to a letter you have recently received from the Director of UNIDIR concerning the persistent need for core contributions from you.

Distinguished Delegates,

The various reviews of the work of the United Nations in peace and security over the past years, and the realities on the ground, have reiterated the urgent need for all of us to act preventively. Disarmament is obviously an extremely effective tool to limit the risk of accidents that could spark conflict and sets limits to the potential destructiveness of armed disputes.

At the same time, the comprehensive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pushes us towards an ever more integrated, horizontal way of working across issues, with clear links to disarmament. Reducing arms stockpiles would free money to be invested in development.

During the Secretary-General’s visit to Geneva last week, he planted a Ginkgo biloba sapling of a tree that withstood the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima. A strong, symbolic reminder of the destructiveness of these weapons and their impact on development.

Similarly, particularly through Goal 16 with its focus on the rule of law, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can help reduce the risk of conflict, making the arms race even more redundant.

The political will that made possible the ground breaking agreements reached last year on the Sustainable Development Goals, on Climate Change and the other defining policy frameworks, should act as an example for all Member States on the issue of disarmament.
The clear connections between disarmament and development remind us that the Conference on Disarmament does not exist in isolation. What is – or rather should be – negotiated in the Conference has consequences that go far beyond the Palais des Nations in Geneva. And most certainly, the Conference on Disarmament does not exist in isolation from the General Assembly, which has the primary role in setting the agenda of the Conference. I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak here in New York and would like to reiterate my call on the General Assembly to use its moral and political weight to help move the Conference on Disarmament forward.

We need to rebuild trust. Instead of returning to the animosity of past difficult times, let us return to the constructive pragmatism that saw some of the most important disarmament treaties negotiated in Geneva and elsewhere.

Thank you very much.