First Committee

“General debate on all disarmament and international security agenda items”

Statement by Austria

delivered by

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New York, 03 October 2017

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Madam Chair,

At the outset, let me congratulate you and the bureau on your election and assure you of the full support of the Austrian delegation.

Austria aligns herself with the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union.

Madam Chair,

A few weeks ago, the world learnt that earlier this year in Russia Stanislav Petrov passed away. We all pay tribute to this courageous man and his unique feat. His story resounds with us today in two important ways. As it was the case in 1983, the danger of all-destroying nuclear war is still hauntingly close. But Petrov reminds us also that even when catastrophe seems inevitable, it is never too late to do the right thing. It is up to us to learn from the man’s wisdom as his legacy.

Madam Chair,

These days, the attention not only of experts in disarmament and international security, but of the international community at large, is very much focused on the urgent problem of the nuclear and ballistic missile programmes of the DPRK. Austria’s stance has been clear and vocal in condemning the DPRK’s activities in this regard and in calling on Pyongyang to change course. We have been implementing faithfully all measures imposed by the United Nations Security Council and by the European Union, and supporting to the best of our national capabilities efforts to come to terms with this problem.

The crisis is now racing towards its culmination. A peaceful and negotiated solution must be found, or else we face disaster. The JCPOA on the Iranian nuclear programme offers itself as a source of inspiration for a settlement of the Korean problem. The agreement with Tehran shows that untiring diplomacy still brings the best achievable results, even when dealing with the seemingly most untractable problems.

Two conclusions from the North Korean development are already evident today. The first has to do with the regrettable fact that the DPRK is the only country which still conducts nuclear test explosions in the 21st century. All other States agree that such behaviour is unacceptable. This position would be even more credible if those States which have not already done so would sign and ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. It would be particularly important that by taking such a step, the remaining so-called Annex 2 States finally allow for the CTBT’s entry into force.
The other early conclusion from the North Korean situation is that the current international nuclear non-proliferation regime with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty at its centre could unfortunately not prevent the country from acquiring a nuclear weapon capability. So the non-proliferation regime has to be further strengthened. Existing mechanisms to suppress supply of proliferation-relevant items could and should work better.

But we must not only think hard about how we can more effectively block countries from going nuclear. We have to pay more attention to the fundamental question why a State would decide to go down the nuclear path in the first place. In the case of the DPRK one reason is certainly that Pyongyang believes that it needs a nuclear deterrent for the sake of its security. Recently it was argued in the Security Council why the DPRK’s security is not strengthened, but jeopardized by nuclear weapons. We concur with that assessment and add that this holds true for all States. The negotiators of the NPT acknowledged that non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament are interdependent. The intended prolonged existence of nuclear weapons as manifest in costly modernization programs and the failure to make progress in nuclear disarmament is a reason for nuclear proliferation. As long as nuclear weapons exist, the security of all States is in danger.

Madam Chair,

Recently the large majority of the world’s States, among them Austria, has shown a way out of this security dilemma. The new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a historic achievement which Austria takes pride to have helped come about. 122 States adopted the new treaty back in July. Many like Austria have in the meantime already signed, and the first ones even ratified.

By doing so, these States unreservedly reject nuclear weapons. They reaffirm the choice they once made when they acceded to the NPT as non-nuclear weapon States. At that time, some of us – certainly not Austria, to be sure - may still have felt that forgoing a nuclear weapons option was a sacrifice in terms of national security. They may have given that option away not without a degree of reluctance, in exchange for the yet unfulfilled promise that the nuclear weapon States would reciprocate by disarming in accordance with NPT article VI.

In the meantime, the overwhelming majority of States have come to the conclusion that their security is better served without nuclear weapons, than with them. This is also the reason why so many countries are States Parties of nuclear weapon free zones, or have nationally declared themselves nuclear weapon free. Based on the knowledge of the grave humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapon explosions,
more and more States have come to the conclusion that the continued existence of nuclear weapons would not be advantageous or desirable in any way, but poses a threat to national as well as collective security, even human survival, and should end. This conviction fostered the necessary political will of a clear majority of States to prohibit nuclear weapons in the TPNW and thereby finally prohibiting the last – and most dangerous -class of weapons of mass destruction not yet outlawed. The TPNW therefore greatly strengthens nonproliferation and the NPT, rendering a major contribution to the implementation of its article VI.

While the TPNW benefits non-proliferation, it is absolutely groundbreaking for nuclear disarmament and a major, indispensable step towards a world free from nuclear weapons. The new instrument deserves more room than is available here. We will therefore return to it later during the dedicated thematic debate.

Madam Chair,

Beyond the nuclear sphere, there are a few more areas relevant to the work of this Committee on which Austria would like to comment.

Similar to the TPNW, the Chemical Weapons Convention has outlawed the use of chemical weapons. With today 192 States Parties this ban has almost universal reach. Austria takes the reports of the use of chemical weapons in Syria extremely seriously. The prohibited use of chemical weapons, leading to a high number of civilian casualties, is completely unacceptable. Austria applauds the OPCW for its work to implement the CWC and calls for all States Parties to the CWC to make sure that chemical weapons are not used any more.

In the area of conventional disarmament, some positive developments deserve mentioning.

The Antipersonnel Mine Ban Convention has been the most remarkable success of the 21st century so far. The clearest indicator for the Convention’s effectiveness is the fact that half of the mine affected countries have totally cleared their territory. Unfortunately, the sharp decline in the annual numbers of casualties caused by these particularly insidious, cruel and indiscriminate weapons after the treaty’s entry into force, has recently come to a halt due to renewed use of anti-personnel mines especially by non-State actors. Still far too many people, most of them innocent civilians, women and children, continue to fall victim to antipersonnel mines as we have recently seen in Iraq, Myanmar and Syria. The Review Conference in Maputo in 2014 has agreed on the target of ridding the world of these weapons by the year 2025. While the aim is ambitious, it is definitely achievable. For this, further progress
both in universalisation and national implementation is needed. Austria wishes to use its current presidency of the Convention, and in particular the upcoming Meeting of States Parties in Vienna in December, to generate a strong impulse for carrying further our common work under the Convention towards our shared goal of a world free from antipersonnel mines.

A second positive development is the Arms Trade Treaty. We welcome that the ATT for the first time ever sets legally binding international standards for the transfer of conventional weapons. This is a great success for the international community at large and we are pleased that already 92 states adhere to the ATT. However, in its 4th year of entering into legal force the full application of the ATT criteria requires further work. In our view ATT states should not lose sight that the ATT aims at reducing human suffering. The contribution the ATT could make towards the SDGs was discussed at the last conference of States Parties. Transparency is crucial for the effective implementation of the ATT. We command the contribution that civil society and industry make towards achieving the goals of the ATT.

Madam Chair,

Austria condemns the ongoing use of cluster munitions, outlawed by the Cluster Munitions Convention, in the conflict in Yemen this year, which led to high numbers of mostly civilian casualties. Austria calls on all States to stop using cluster munitions and to join the Convention.

Austria continues to be concerned about the use of explosive weapons in populated areas which has become the main reason for harm to civilians in many conflicts. When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, more than 90% of casualties are civilians. We have to state that this humanitarian problem has repercussions far beyond the immediate area of conflict. It is harm caused by explosive weapons which drives most of today’s refugees and internally displaced persons away from their war-ridden homes. The international community has to address this issue and cannot remain silent.

Austria and a number of other States as well as representatives from UN agencies, the ICRC and civil society have started to look for multilateral action on this issue. A recent meeting in Geneva, hosted by the ICRC, will be followed by a side-event staged here in New York. Our aim is to strengthen the observance of existing international humanitarian law. Austria is ready to engage with interested delegations and civil society on 18 October at 13:15 in conference room A.

Madam Chair,
One last word about institutions; In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to ensure the proper functioning of the institutional arrangements which we have established together as UN Member States and as States Parties under the various multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation agreements. In particular, arrears of financial contributions have led to shortages of funding. These have in part been compensated by the exemplary dedication and idealism of UN personnel, of representatives from individual member States, and of course of civil society activists, whose crucial contributions for international peace, security and disarmament I would like to emphasise here. It is clear that States cannot abandon, or delegate to somebody else, responsibility for the proper funding of the institutions which they have created. Our common commitment to disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control must also include everybody’s preparedness to shoulder their share of the financial burden involved.

Madam Chair,

In closing, let me once again assure you of the full support of the Austrian delegation and wish you success. Under your able leadership, we are looking forward to engaging in relevant discussions over the next few weeks, which will result in important draft resolutions to be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Plenary.