Mr. Chairman,

First of all, I wish to congratulate you on the assumption of the chairmanship of this year’s First Committee meeting and I want to assure you of the full support of my delegation in the implementation of your mandate.

Belgium fully aligns itself with the statement made by the European Union. I wish to add a number of points of particular importance to my delegation.

Mr. Chairman,

Today, the challenges to the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime are formidable. One country is making rapid strides towards establishing an operational nuclear capability of its own. Belgium unequivocally condemns North Korea’s advancing ballistic missile and nuclear programme, including the nuclear test carried out in September. We call on North Korea to finally change its course, to comply with the resolutions of the Security Council and to take the necessary steps towards denuclearization.

Every North Korean test reminds of the crucial importance of the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). This is the only way to enforce a global and definitive ban on nuclear testing, verified by an international organisation. Without the CTBT the risk that new and more powerful nuclear weapons will be developed remains greater. Only a world without nuclear testing can lead to a world without nuclear weapons. As current co-chairs of the Article XIV process, Belgium and Iraq will undertake a number of initiatives to encourage adhesion to the treaty and to facilitate its entry into force.
When faced with current challenges in non-proliferation, it is worth recalling that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran demonstrates how seemingly irreconcilable differences can be overcome by the strength of multilateral diplomacy, when it is guided by a shared vision and underpinned by collective action. We wish to underline the importance of the continued implementation of this nuclear agreement by all sides.

Mr. Chairman,

We cannot be satisfied by the current pace of nuclear disarmament. The last major nuclear arms control agreement dates back to 2010. Nuclear arsenals are being modernized. New nuclear capabilities are being added with potentially destabilizing effect. Nuclear weapon states, and particularly those with the largest arsenals, need to undertake further action, in accordance with Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Despite the setback of the 2015 Review Conference, we still have an agreed framework to move forward, namely the 2010 action plan. Actual stockpile reductions of all types of nuclear weapons should be coupled with policy steps to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in defence doctrines. Warning and decision times for the launch of nuclear weapons should be increased, thereby reducing the risk of accidental or unauthorized attacks. Belgium has supported UN resolutions to this effect.

These resolutions are a reminder of the responsibility both nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states share in realizing the objective of article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. We all have our role to play in fostering the conditions conducive to effective progress towards disarmament. Creating an appropriate security environment is one element. Building trust and confidence another.

Mr. Chairman,

The international division over the path forward for nuclear disarmament has deepened and some principles of our common approach have been put into question. Belgium doubts that the recently concluded treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons will foster progress. As a political instrument, it lacks the support of the main stakeholders. As a disarmament instrument, it lacks the prerequisites to be effective, such as a verification regime to ensure compliance and deter infraction. Moreover, as the treaty declares its primacy over other international agreements, it risks weakening some basic components of the global non-proliferation regime, especially when it is interpreted as offering a less burdensome alternative. The treaty’s provisions regarding nuclear tests put it at odds with the CTBT and could
complicate the entry into force of the latter. The treaty also proposes a safeguards regime which is below the current golden standard. We continue to view the Additional Protocol as an essential tool to prevent the use of undeclared nuclear material for illegal weapon programmes.

As the nuclear weapon prohibition treaty does not reinforce the global non-proliferation regime, Belgium will not sign it. While we disagree with other States on this issue, we remain ready to cooperate with all stakeholders to jointly further our goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Polarization will not bring us any closer to this objective. Diverging views on one issue should not block us from making progress on others. Nor should this issue contaminate debates on non-related affairs.

We remain convinced that a realistic path towards nuclear disarmament is provided by the progressive approach. This is a gradual process based on mutually reinforcing building blocks. Regretfully, many elements have been blocked for years and we need renewed political will to reinvigorate them. In this regard, we welcome and support the actions to move forward on the issue of a fissile material cut off treaty through the establishment of the high-level expert preparatory group. The issue of nuclear disarmament verification will likewise benefit from the input of a group of governmental experts. Such actions in the UN framework can be complemented by plurinational initiatives, such as the International Partnership on Nuclear Disarmament verification, of which my country is a member.

Mr. Chairman,

Chemical weapons are the only weapon of mass destruction employed in conflict during this 21st century. Their re-emergence on the battlefield, a hundred years after their first use, is an intolerable blemish for humanity. As was recalled in the Ieper declaration two years ago, any use of chemical weapons is totally unacceptable and violates the norms and standards of the international community. The fact that a state party to the Chemical Weapons Convention has used this weapon against its own population serves as a grim reminder that the strength of a treaty depends on the compliance by its state parties and that declared commitments have to be assessed through robust verification. Belgium calls upon Syria to cooperate with the OPCW and to shed full light on its chemical weapons programme. We reconfirm our confidence in the impartiality and expertise of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism, which needs to determine responsibility for the horrendous chemical attacks in Syria. This crucial work should be extended beyond its current mandate.
Mr. Chairman,

Let me add a final word on our working methods. Every year this committee gathers as a unique forum allowing all UN member States to address the full range of non-proliferation and disarmament issues. The breadth of our agenda is reflected not only in a wealth of statements, debates and side-events, but also in a yearly expanding compendium of resolutions and declarations. Though we should not shy away from voicing our opinions, we must also avoid losing focus or subordinating action to rhetoric. We must ask the question if a yearly repetition of the same resolutions that have only undergone technical updates serves the purpose of this committee. And do we need to annually request reports from the Secretary-General on the same resolutions, especially if these reports do not provide us with new insights? Practical steps can be taken with a view to improving working methods, such as bi-annualizing or tri-annualizing resolutions, and refraining from systematically requesting reports from the Secretariat.

Thank you.