74 United Nations General Assembly
First Committee

General Debate

Statement by Austria

delivered by

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Chairperson,

Congratulations to you and the Bureau on your election. I assure you of my delegation's full support. Austria is aligned with the statement of the European Union and I would like to add a couple of points from a national perspective.

Chairperson,

We are witnessing an age of acceleration in the armaments area. New technologies like cyber weaponry and hypersonic missiles dramatically reduce reaction times and lead to increasing automation. Increasing levels of autonomy are beginning to impact in a broad range of weaponry, from missiles to drones, but also intelligence gathering. These developments will shape the future battlefield of armed conflict. At the same time countries are increasing or upgrading their strategic weapons stockpiles and ending long-established agreements. Yet in spite of this, we see much of the disarmament architecture blocked by procedural issues and lack of progress on existing commitments to disarm.

What heartens us, however, is the plethora of initiatives that have tried to overcome these blockades and make concrete progress on disarmament – from the prohibition of nuclear weapons and growing momentum on nuclear risk reduction, cybersecurity and to explosive weapons in populated areas. We must redouble our efforts and return to our agreement contained in SSOD 1 that is to seek security in disarmament. Disarmament is indeed a contribution to security, while embarking in arms races risk to further aggravate existing tensions.

Regarding new technologies, we are very concerned about the increasing proliferation, as well as increasing velocity and range of missiles and rockets. New hypersonic missiles reduce reaction times drastically and have highly destabilising effects. Ballistic missile technology is being used and sought by an increasing number of countries. Austria is actively engaged in this area as Executive Secretariat of the Hague Code of Conduct against the Proliferation of Ballistic Missiles, which now counts 140 members. We call on all remaining countries to join this very useful transparency- and confidence-building instrument.

The weaponisation of artificial intelligence poses fundamental challenges to international law and international humanitarian law in particular. Against the backdrop of rapid technological progress, we need to urgently draw the line between the acceptable and unacceptable. It is an ethical and legal imperative that humans must remain in control of selecting and engaging targets. In the area of LAWS (lethal autonomous weapon systems), we have a unique opportunity and moral obligation to act before we are overtaken by facts on the ground. Inaction would undermine our current legal framework, which is based on humans – not machines. The deployment
and use of LAWS would significantly alter warfare as we know it. Therefore, Austria supports the immediate commencement of negotiations of a legally binding commitment to ensure human control over decisions of life and death. The selection of targets and the decision to use force must remain with humans.

Chairperson,

Space is continuously increasing in significance for our everyday life. More countries and companies than ever are actively seeking to engage in outer space. For many decades it has been a shared concern of the international community that any impediment or the weaponisation of space would have highly negative consequences. Despite this, we see an increasing readiness to consider outer space as a domain for warfare. Austria is most concerned at this development and resolutely disagrees with space becoming a new area of conflict. The militarization of space would have a highly negative impact on the security of all states, lead to miscalculation and escalation, as well as endanger vital civilian functions worldwide. Governments must establish global mechanisms to ensure that space resources are used for peaceful purposes only. This requires a joint effort and above all, an effective multilateral approach. As a spacefaring nation, Austria believes in the potential of space activities as a driver for development from which all members of the international community can benefit equally.

Cyberspace and Cybersecurity are entering ever more domains and need our urgent attention. We therefore welcome the very constructive and interactive debates during the 1st substantial session of the OEWG (Open Ended Working Group) on Cybersecurity in September, expertly chaired by Amb. Lauber whose approach we fully support. It was reassuring to see a consensus emerging on UN GGE reports as the basis for our work as well as on the application of existing international law and the UN Charta in its entirety in cyberspace. Human rights and fundamental freedoms as well International Humanitarian Law are a central part of this package. We have also noted the concern of many States regarding the threats of cybercrime. We need to find a link to - without duplicating – the excellent work done in Vienna by UNODC and the open-ended intergovernmental expert group on cybercrime. Austria regrets that involvement of stakeholders in this first OEWG session was very limited, and we hope that these important perspectives can be integrated more into future sessions. We also encourage the chairs of the GGE and the OEWG to work together to allow for swift progress on these urgent matters.

Chairperson,

The urbanisation of warfare entails increasing challenges for civilians, in particular when explosive weapons with wide area effects are used in populated areas. We must address these concerning developments. The international community must find ways to strengthen the implementation of IHL in urban warfare. An important
step in that direction was the Vienna Conference on the Protection of Civilians in Urban Warfare on 1/2 October 2019, which showed not only a very high level of interest with 133 states participating, but also demonstrated widespread support for the elaboration of a political declaration that would recognize the problem and contain clear actions that should be taken. We will circulate the many proposals for themes to be dealt with by the political declaration and hope this will provide for a good start for the consultations on 18 November in Geneva. We are delighted to start working with all partners to heed the longstanding appeals of the Secretary General and the President of the ICRC and develop a political declaration.

Chairperson,

In the area of nuclear weapons, unfortunately, standstill in nuclear disarmament has even moved into partial reversals driven by countries who think that security is achieved by increasing their weapons stockpiles or making them more effective. They continue developing new nuclear weapons, deploying more delivery systems and are running trillion-dollar modernisation programmes aimed at keeping nuclear weapons in service for decades to come.

We particularly regret that the INF Treaty, one of the pillars in the disarmament and arms control architecture is no longer in force. Mutual recriminations do not help, even well founded ones. What we need for our security is a world without land-based intermediate range missiles, since they are particularly prone to trigger a full scale nuclear war, due to their short flight time. We call on the Russian Federation and the United States to find an arrangement that ensures that such weapons are not deployed which is of utmost importance for European security. We also call on both sides to urgently start discussions on the extension of and successor agreement to the New START treaty.

For 23 years we have been calling for the entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). It is high time for the Annex II states to put words to stop nuclear testing into deeds by joining the Treaty. The nuclear weapons programme of the DPRK has demonstrated how crucial the work of the CTBTO and its International Monitoring System is. Therefore, it should also play a key role in the urgent denuclearisation of the DPRK. We also hope that a solution can be found to retain the historic JCPOA. We strongly regret the withdrawal by the United States and urge Iran to return to compliance.

At the same time, we see concrete progress by a clear majority, who see their security threatened by nuclear weapons and continue to demand that nuclear disarmament obligations be fulfilled. With the historic adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) 122 states unequivocally affirmed that a nuclear weapon-free world is a more secure world for all. The catastrophic humanitarian consequences of a nuclear explosion, be it intentionally, accidentally or
by miscalculation must be prevented. The TPNW is indispensable for the fulfilment of the NPT’s ambition of a nuclear weapon free world. It closes the legal gap and is now an established part of the nuclear disarmament architecture. As Austria’s Foreign Minister said during the International Day for the total elimination of nuclear weapons: “With every additional signature and ratification, states send the powerful signal that having a say on nuclear weapons is not exclusive to states who possess them and that the security of their citizens is equally important, and equally at risk.” I therefore call on all states to join the 79 signatories and 32 states parties by signing and ratifying the TPNW.

We hope that during the upcoming review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, concrete progress will be achieved toward the long overdue implementation of article VI. We are encouraged by the many initiatives aimed at achieving this goal, building bridges and including elements such as risk reduction and verification. We look forward to a successful outcome of the 2020 Review Conference.

Finally, a brief word on the Arms Trade Treaty, a success story with more than 100 States parties and an effective contribution to reducing human suffering caused by the transfer of conventional weapons. We are eager to work with the Argentinian chair, the chairs of the working groups on implementation, transparency and universalisation as well as all stakeholders on the further strengthening of the treaty. The excellent work of the Latvian chair in particular on gender issues is an example we hope will be followed in other areas.

To conclude, Chairperson, the world won’t wait for us to catch up. We need to be ahead of current developments from artificial intelligence to the urbanisation of warfare. And we must do more to ensure that existing agreements are kept and commitments fulfilled. Let’s work together in this spirit and achieve concrete progress during this First Committee.