

Address at the Conference on Disarmament

Speech

Geneva

25 February 2019

Thank you very much Mr President, Secretary-General Guterres, Secretary-General Møller, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Ms Nakamitsu, distinguished Ambassadors, Excellencies, one and all.

As Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, and as a former Australian Minister for Defence immediately preceding that, I am acutely aware of the complexity of the issues with which the Conference on Disarmament grapples.

Chief among these is the importance of maintaining adherence to and respect for long-standing, carefully negotiated arms control regimes. It is this system of treaties and agreements that underpins our international rules-based order, and delivers stability, security, and the certainty that we all work towards.

These agreements give us confidence that we can deal with regional or global crises on equal terms.

Mr President, it is fair to say that there is a frustration that this Conference has not maintained the momentum and ambition that it was established to provide. That it has a proud tradition but, perhaps is not currently living up to that.

Australia believes we urgently need to infuse new energy into our work so that this Conference can play the important part it should in the international rules based order on which as I have said we depend.

The Conference has worked hard over the last two years on technical issues, on forging cooperation, on making preparations for the time when negotiations are possible. The next step, logically, is to declare an intention to do just that - to commence negotiations.

An Australian priority in this regard is a treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. We see no substantive reason why negotiations cannot start on this treaty now – with differences fleshed out over the course of discussions. That is the purpose of negotiations. We encourage all members of this Conference to be positive and constructive in this endeavour.

As we have also continued to make clear, the rules-based global order extends to space and Australia will continue to work with other nations to ensure the long-term sustainability, safety and security of the outer space domain.

We do not, however, support the current proposed draft treaty that has been submitted to this Conference on outer space. Our view is that, at this point in time, our efforts are more effectively focused on limiting unacceptable behaviour in space.

Australia's Presidency

Mr President, next year Australia will preside over this Conference along with Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh and Belarus. We look forward to active coordination to ensure productive outcomes and purposeful continuity between Presidents.

Indeed, Australia's Presidency in 2020 comes at an important time for disarmament – the 50th anniversary of the NPT, and 25 years since its indefinite extension. I can assure you that our commitment to uphold and strengthen the NPT has not waned.

Australia remains firmly committed to working towards the ultimate goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. But efforts must be both practical and feasible. No matter how well-intentioned, initiatives that disregard the global realities in the hope of accelerated progress are more likely to be counter-productive. Experience tells us that there are no short cuts to disarmament.

When we consider the difficulty of the task ahead we should acknowledge the progress made so far. The Secretary-General adverted to this in his opening remarks. During the Cold War, the number of nuclear weapons peaked at over 70,000. Today, those numbers have fallen to around 14,400 - many of which are proposed to be dismantled.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty – "START 1" – defined cuts to the nuclear weapons stockpiles of the two top possessor states. So did New START in 2010. It is critical for global stability that this arrangement is extended. In 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty – or "INF" - was a pioneering agreement bringing about, for the first time, a bilateral reduction in nuclear weapons.

Australia does remain disappointed that Russia has so far not addressed its issues of non-compliance with this treaty - placing its very ongoing viability in question. We do urge Russia to return to compliance in the period of time available. It is in no one's interest to return to an arms race like that witnessed during the Cold War.

Mr President

We should use this time ahead of next year's NPT Review Conference as an opportunity to consider our future. It is a pragmatic fact we can't rid the world of nuclear weapons today or realistically within this decade. But we can absolutely work towards further significant reductions.

I offered that view to the United Nations General Assembly in September last year, and I offer it again today. We cannot achieve our shared aims if we look short term – ours is a problem that needs tenacity and persistence over time, and we should prize these ambitions.

Australia's Contributions

Mr President, members, in March next year, March 2020, Australia will host the International Youth Nuclear Congress. It is a reminder to me that our work, or our inactions, will be inherited by the generations that follow us.

And there are gains of which we can be proud. One of my early priorities as Foreign Minister was to co-chair with Japanese Foreign Minister, my friend, Taro Kono, the Friends of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Meeting in New York last year. At that meeting, we welcomed further progress toward the universalisation of the treaty.

With Thailand's recent ratification, we can celebrate that all members of ASEAN are now party to the Treaty. This is a significant regional achievement.

We also welcome the most recent ratification of the Treaty by Zimbabwe earlier this month.

Mr President, Australia remains convinced that transparency, compliance, verification, and if necessary enforcement, are foundational issues that require solutions.

And Australia, with others, is working through the technical challenges of disarmament through the US-initiated International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification.

Similarly, Australia has worked through many of the technical issues surrounding a treaty banning fissile material for nuclear weapons including in two UN-mandated groups.

Through the 12 member cross-regional Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative, we are in dialogue with Nuclear Weapons States on ways to enhance transparency.

We also support the vital role of Security Council resolutions in moderating destabilising influences. Australia supports the Security Council's resolutions calling for the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. These efforts have provided the framework for much of the efforts to address tension on the Korean peninsula.

We also welcome the second summit meeting between the United States and the DPRK in Hanoi later this week.

Mr President, it is Australia's view that the Conference on Disarmament has no time to waste because the international community has no time to waste. We must continue to build areas of common ground, and commit to both the technical work and the broader efforts needed to conduct negotiations. Australia stands ready to be a strong partner in all of those efforts. Thank you very much.