

STATEMENT TO THE FIRST COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

I welcome this opportunity to address the Committee and am especially pleased to greet members of delegations who are joining us for the first time.

It is my honour to congratulate your Chairperson on his appointment to guide our work. Ambassador Percaya's long experience working on disarmament issues and his personal commitment to this cause will serve the Committee well over the weeks ahead.

I also wish to recognize the distinguished members of the Bureau and to assure them and all delegations of the fullest cooperation of the Office for Disarmament Affairs throughout the work of the Committee.

Many delegations, along with many observers in civil society, viewed last year's deliberations of the First Committee with some concern. Words I have heard describing that session were: "frustrating", "gravely disappointing", along with comments noting the atmosphere of "tension" and "significant divergences of views." In particular, the deliberations on nuclear disarmament resolutions featured an abundance of red lines, and a scarcity of green lights.

Some of these concerns reflected longstanding difficulties in the UN disarmament machinery—including the impasse in the Conference on Disarmament, the chronic inability of the UN Disarmament Commission to achieve a consensus, and the long history of divided votes on certain key resolutions in the First Committee.

Other concerns reflect an abiding impatience over the slow rate of progress in nuclear disarmament and the persistence of nuclear proliferation concerns in at least three regions. We are continuing to see very high levels of global military expenditure—despite the world financial crisis—as pressing social and economic needs go unaddressed. We see greater efforts to perfect weaponry rather than to refine the instruments of peace.

On a larger dimension, we are encountering new challenges to the growth of the rule of law in disarmament.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has still not entered into force.

Significant obstacles and competing interests have continued to delay the conclusion of an Arms Trade Treaty and even the start of negotiations on a multilateral fissile material treaty.

None of the major treaties addressing weapons of mass destruction has yet achieved universal membership.

Allegations of non-compliance persist over each of the key obligations in the NPT relating to nuclear non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

There remains strong resistance to commencing negotiations on a nuclear weapons convention, despite the support for such a goal voiced by over 140 Member States.

Several Protocols to treaties establishing regional nuclear-weapon-free zones remain un-ratified.

And there are no multilateral disarmament treaties addressing nuclear-weapon-delivery systems, missile defence, or space weapons.

After surveying such concerns, one is tempted to conclude that the entire process of multilateral cooperation to advance disarmament and non-proliferation goals has come to a halt.

None of these concerns should come as a surprise, given the complexity of the issues on the Committee's agenda, including some that have preoccupied the Committee for decades.

Future generations may well inherit some of these challenges. In this regard, I am pleased to remind delegations that this year marks the tenth anniversary of the Secretary-General's first report on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education.¹ According to that report, the purpose of education in these fields is to empower citizens to make their own contributions to the achievement of concrete disarmament and non-proliferation measures.

In considering the many difficulties we have encountered in pursuing these ends, I think it is indisputable that they are due far more to differences among the policies and priorities of its Member States than to any flaw in the organization or mandate of this Committee. The essential challenge is to harmonize national efforts to achieve common ends.

Year after year, the Committee has laboured to make incremental progress by solving parts of larger problems, while never forgetting our fundamental shared objectives. Here is how former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld once described this process: "... the tendency in the United Nations is to wear away, or break down, differences, thus helping toward solutions which approach the common interests and application of the principles of the Charter."²

It is this pursuit of the common interest that must remain the primary focus of the deliberations of this Committee, which must not become just another arena for the competitive advancement of one State's interests over another. There are already too many such arenas elsewhere.

¹ A/57/124, 30 August 2002.

² Introduction, Annual Report on the Work of the Organization (1956-1957), A/ 3594/Add.1, p. 3.

We have much to learn from our predecessors who have established strong foundations upon which we are expected to build. Speaking shortly after his election as President of the first General Assembly in January 1946, Paul Henri-Spaak called upon all delegations to remember, in advancing their own particular national interests, that these interests must, in his words, “take their place in the wider setting of the general interest.”³

This Committee and the rest of the UN disarmament machinery will regain its momentum and will continue to advance disarmament norms when Member States recognize that there is in fact a harmony between national interests and the general interest.

This is what Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon meant when he once called nuclear disarmament a “global public good of the highest order.”⁴ By advancing the interests common to all States, we advance the interests of each State.

This is the spirit that has the potential to revitalize global disarmament efforts, and what could be a better time and place for this to start occurring than in this 67th session of the deliberations of the General Assembly’s First Committee?

A “business as usual” approach may well be the easiest to pursue, but it will not suffice to solve the problems we face in achieving disarmament goals and will only aggravate the global crisis we are facing in this field, especially with respect to nuclear disarmament.

Let us recall that *wēijī*—the Chinese word for crisis—combines two characters, one representing “danger” and the other “opportunity”. We all know the dangers if this particular crisis is not resolved soon. So the real challenge facing this Committee is to discover or create new opportunities for progress across the full range of challenges we are facing. Together, let us convert these dangers into new common opportunities.

³ Official Records of the General Assembly, First Session, Part One, Plenary Meetings, 2nd meeting, p. 48.

⁴ Address to EastWest Institute, SG/SM/11881, 24 October 2008.