Remarks by the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Ms. Izumi Nakamitsu on follow-up of resolutions and decisions adopted by the First Committee at its previous session and on the presentation of reports by the Secretary-General

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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome this opportunity to participate in this traditional exchange with you on the follow-up to resolutions and decisions adopted by the First Committee at its previous session.

The basis for this exchange is General Assembly resolution 58/316, in which the Assembly decided that all Main Committees should introduce the practice of “question time” to enable a dynamic and candid exchange with heads of departments and offices, representatives of the Secretary-General and special rapporteurs.

Until last year, this exchange has largely served for the presentation of statistical information on responses to resolutions that request information and views from Member States. You can find this information and an overview of the other reports by the Secretary-General in the table that will be uploaded to the website of the Office for Disarmament Affairs.

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Rather than using this time to provide you with a detailed survey of the various resolutions, I would like to speak to the broader topic and use this opportunity to continue a discussion I initiated with Geneva-based delegations.

Last month, I had the privilege of addressing the Conference on Disarmament. I appreciate the positive reactions I have received, especially on the operation of the organs of the United Nations disarmament machinery.

To briefly recap for the benefit of our colleagues based in New York and in capitals, I observed that these organs do not seem to function as a key part of what should be an integrated system. The Conference on Disarmament has not been central for disarmament negotiations in a long time. Of course, this is not the situation any of us want to see. I think you will agree that the challenges in disarmament discussions are not just the difficult and sensitive nature of the substance but also the processes, mechanics, fora and methods of discussions and negotiations. I suspect many of you want to review this and feel there is scope for improvement.

In light of the long stalemate in the other bodies, by necessity the General Assembly has recently taken on a great variety of roles. These include initiating studies on new issues, convening expert groups to deliberate and elaborate measures on specific issues, and conducting negotiations on treaties in both the areas of conventional and nuclear weapons. The General Assembly is also increasingly accepted as a forum to advance core issues that have long been stuck at the CD.

As I mentioned in Geneva, to the extent that these innovations are effective, I have no doubt that Member States will continue to make use of them.
I only just mentioned that I saw room to explore opportunities for even greater dynamism in the working methods of the New York-based organs.

In this connection, I intend to focus my remaining remarks on how to improve the operation of disarmament “expert groups” as food-for-thought and in the hopes of stimulating a dynamic exchange. It is my hope that this is only a beginning of our reflections and reviews, so today, I will only touch on this one mechanism. There are of course many other difficult aspects to our disarmament machinery, and my commitment to work with you in support of your efforts to reactivate the CD remains strong.

Historically, expert groups in the field of disarmament have served an impressive variety of functions and have led to some ground-breaking outcomes. They have elaborated elements for legally binding instruments, including the Treaty of Pelindaba, the incendiary weapons protocol to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and the Arms Trade Treaty. They have developed non-binding instruments such as the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons. They have carried out academic studies on a range of topics too long for me to list. They have conducted investigations into the use of chemical weapons, and elaborated the guidelines for the Secretary-General’s Mechanism. They developed and continue to review the operation of our two conventional arms transparency mechanisms.

Since the General Assembly established the first expert groups in the field of disarmament in 1960, their general practice and working methods have remained largely consistent. Groups are generally established under the auspices of the Secretary-General, experts are expected to participate in an individual capacity, and groups normally operate on the basis of consensus.

For some time, the composition of these groups reflected a mix of both governmental and non-governmental experts, as appropriate for their respective mandates. In recent decades, there has been a move toward establishing governmental groups as a default, and assigning these groups with mandates to deliberate and produce outcomes on agreed measures. Experts in such groups essentially participate in their national capacities, and may even bring sizable delegations with them.

This evolution is good to the extent that it has enabled the First Committee to be a flexible and dynamic mechanism for advancing the disarmament agenda. However, I believe the current practice could possibly benefit from closer scrutiny in three inter-related areas:

The first is cost-effectiveness.

Approximately three-quarters of the cost of these groups come from travel expenses for the nominated experts. Consequently, there is no substantial difference between the costs of convening three one-week sessions of an expert group versus a three-week negotiating conference open to all Member States.

To the extent that we accept that certain expert groups are actually pursuing intergovernmental deliberations in a small group setting, treating them as such would ease an unnecessary burden on the regular budget, avoid wasteful administrative fees and ultimately enable more groups to be convened in a given year.
Many other organs within the United Nations system convene ad hoc working groups and expert groups as subsidiary bodies. The work of the First Committee may benefit from pursuing this practice more regularly.

This could also benefit the sustainability and frequency of groups with mandates to review existing mechanisms and instruments, such as the Register for Conventional Arms and the Report on Military Expenditures.

The second inter-related area where scrutiny is warranted is representation.

Due in particular to the high costs associated with the travel of experts, the total size of expert groups have been limited. The small size of these groups, which have ranged recently from 15 to 25 members, poses a great challenge for meeting the mandated requirement for equitable geographic representation.

There will always be a legitimate need for governments to pursue multilateral deliberations and negotiations in a smaller setting. The endurance of the Conference on Disarmament is testament to this.

But overly restrictive group sizes can give rise to concerns over transparency, deprive key stakeholders from a seat at the table and ultimately harm the legitimacy of any agreed outcome.

The mandate for the Chair of the high-level FMCT preparatory expert group to convene open-ended consultations in New York is an important innovation aimed at making this work more inclusive. This mechanism could be incorporated into the mandates of future groups, especially on issues with a similarly broad level of interest.

More formal interaction with other disarmament bodies may also help increase the transparency and inclusiveness of expert groups. And again, the establishment of open-ended groups can be a cost-effective way of guaranteeing inclusivity by enabling all those interested to opt in.

Finally, on the matter of representation, the nomination of female participation has steadily increased over the decades, yet today it stands on average at still only 20 per cent. I regret that we have seen an all-male expert group convene as recently as 2012. My Office will continue to encourage all States to promote equal opportunities for the representation of women in these groups.

The third inter-related area for scrutiny is working methods.

In terms of overall methodology, the prevailing practices are fundamentally sound. Nonetheless, I do see some areas for possible improvement.

Expert groups have been the one type of UN disarmament body that has resisted the trend for increasing civil society participation. More and more, expertise on emerging issues, which expert groups are well-suited to address, resides with the NGO community, academia and the private sector.

I would encourage all delegations to consider incorporating these perspectives into your work on a regular basis, whether through dedicated time in meetings, through inviting guest speakers or through other means.
Finally, UNIDIR has a long and distinguished history of providing support for the work of disarmament expert groups. We will continue to facilitate this role in consultation with the lead sponsors, including by budgeting for this where necessary and in accordance with prevailing practice. At the same time, I would encourage those drafting resolutions to consider also reflecting UNIDIR’s role in their texts where appropriate, in recognition of its established role in guiding the development of disarmament policy.

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I close, I would like to say a quick word on the practice of reports by the Secretary-General.

Reports seeking the views of Member States are most effective when they are connected with some discrete process or initiative. Some examples include the compilations of views that fed into the expert groups leading to the Arms Trade Treaty, to the report on transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities, and to the mechanisms to review the conventional arms transparency instruments.

A large number of reports are reoccurring and are associated with so-called traditional resolutions. The rates of participation in these reports will continue to speak to how they are respectively valued by the membership.

I hope this brief survey has given you some food-for-thought. As I said, I hope this will be the beginning of our serious reflections on the disarmament machinery. I end my remark with the same concluding words I used at the Conference on Disarmament on 12 September. I am a strong believer of the UN Secretary-General’s moral authority and thought-leadership. We are committed to further sharpen these roles of the Secretary-General in the disarmament field, in support of member states efforts. I look forward to our continued strong and close partnership in this regard.

Thank you very much.