Mr. President,

Thank you for giving me the floor. Allow me to start by congratulating you on your assumption of the Presidency. I wish you and the other members of the P6 - Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland and Israel – success in your endeavours.

In addition to the statement delivered by Belgium on behalf of the European Union, I would like to make the following remarks in my national capacity.

Mr. President,

For many years, we talk decades now, the Conference on Disarmament (CD) has not delivered on its mandate. It is described as “a single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum for the international community”, yet it has not negotiated for a long time. And sadly, 2023 was no exception. However, we did have serious deliberations on various important topics throughout last year and we thank last year’s Presidencies for making this possible, but the Netherlands hopes that in 2024 we can take further steps towards improving the functioning of the CD.

The way we see it, the effective functioning of the CD is hampered by two main issues.

The first issue is the dramatically deteriorated security situation in the world. To highlight just two examples:

Russia’s illegal war on Ukraine grossly violates Ukraine’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and the rights of its citizens. And Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has also, sadly, placed nuclear weapons firmly back on the agenda. The trust that is needed for disarmament, and a nuclear-weapon-free world, is difficult to imagine at this moment. But doing nothing simply isn’t an option.

We are also extremely concerned about the war in Gaza. The Netherlands was shocked by the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023 and emphasizes the Israeli right to self-defence. At the same time, we consistently and explicitly underline the importance of proportionality and necessity of ongoing operations in Gaza, and urge all parties involved to adhere to International Humanitarian Law. The Netherlands is worried about the potential of conflict spreading beyond the borders of Israel and Gaza, and although it may seem impossible at this moment, the only durable solution to this conflict is a credible political process.

Mr. President,

These wars have far-reaching consequences. Not only to civilian populations and regional stability, but also to global security, effective multilateralism and the Rules Based International Order. Although this first issue may be outside of our direct control in this room, we have more control over the second challenge: the way the CD functions internally and as part of the broader disarmament
machinery. In June 2023, the CD members participated in a productive high-level retreat in Montreux, which resulted in an in-depth and open discussion about the functioning of the CD. The Netherlands is a strong proponent of continuing this conversation and looks forward to subsequent discussions on how to take further the ideas generated in Montreux.

Mr. President,

Trust has always been a scarce commodity in arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. For that reason, “trust but verify” has been our unofficial motto for decades. Regrettably, trust is currently extremely low, as a consequence of the current security environment and that harms our work. A mere call to rebuild trust would be too simple. We have to make use of the mechanisms that are already in place or rather “still in place”. And therefore I see the work of the CD in 2024 as crucial: 2024 is a year in which we need to take steps towards rebuilding trust, no matter how difficult it may seem. Not in the last place because the CD has quite some “homework” to do. And we owe it to the world to give it our best attempt.

This “homework” includes the follow-up of some of the results achieved during the First Committee in 2023. I commend the Hungarian CD-Presidency of last year for its hard work on the CD report and the First Committee resolution. The various consultations on this resolution in New York re-emphasized the great interest from non-CD members in the work of the CD. I therefore underline once more our regret that in 2023 the CD was not able to reach consensus on the matter of allowing observers. The Netherlands stands for an inclusive CD, which allows for all UN Member States to observe if they wish to do so.

After all, Rule 34 of the Rules of Procedure clearly states: “the Conference will invite States not members of the Conference, upon their request, to express views in the Conference when the particular concerns of those States are under discussion.” In today’s globalized world, I would be hard pressed to find matters on our agenda that do not concern the States that have indicated their interest in being an observer to the CD. And of course anyone can cherry-pick a sentence from the Rules of Procedure here and there, but let me clarify on record that for the Netherlands an inclusive CD is of utmost importance: all UN Members wishing to observe in the CD should be allowed to do so. And let it be clear that anyone attempting to block observers, either the whole list or on the basis of a country-by-country approach, has political reasons for doing so.

Substantive matters for the CD to follow-up on include the resolution on the prohibition of the use of Radiological Weapons. This resolution indicated broad support for the start of negotiations in the CD to agree on an instrument prohibiting the use of radiological weapons. This is not a new idea: the international community has repeatedly reaffirmed the value of a prohibition on such weapons, including in the final document of SSOD-1 and in substantive work previously undertaken in the CD.

In the context of the NPT, the CD also has a key role to play: nuclear disarmament verification, risk reduction, crisis stability and crisis management will remain major points of attention for the Netherlands in 2024. We will continue to advocate for measures aimed at nuclear risk reduction, such as communication channels, transparency, dialogue about doctrines and increasing decision time in crisis situations. Agreeing on measures on these issues can provide a basis for tangible steps in the future.

Closely related but with a scope that reaches beyond the NPT, the Netherlands firmly supports the start of negotiations on a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons and other explosive devices in the CD. I have said this before, and I will repeat it today: All the preparatory work has been done. Why can’t we just start negotiations on an FMCT and resolve
outstanding issues at the negotiating table? And until we get to the start of negotiations: four out of five of the Nuclear Weapon States have declared a moratorium on the production of fissile material. We once again call on China to join them.

Mr. President,

The Netherlands integrates a gender perspective into all aspects of its foreign and security policy. We remain committed to the full, effective, and accelerated implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. We will promote initiatives to address structural barriers that hinder the full, equal, and meaningful participation and leadership in decision-making of women in all their diversity.

Mr. President,

From our various conversations over the past months, as well as your opening remarks today, I appreciate your inclusive and thoughtful approach to try to find a “landing zone” with regard to the Programme of Work. You can count on my delegation for achieving that, although it is not a goal in itself: as stated in our 2019 FFT-paper “Back to basics”, the Netherlands continues to promote a pragmatic approach by returning to the well-established and functioning practice of using the programme of work as a planning tool for the plenary meetings of the session ahead and by delinking it from the establishment of subsidiary bodies.

That way, we can focus again on what we’re here for: to deal with substance of great importance.

Thank you for giving me the floor.