Excellencies, distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,

It is an honour for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to assume the Presidency of this Conference.

I would like to begin by thanking and congratulating once again my distinguished predecessor, Ambassador Klymenko of Ukraine, and his delegation for his excellent efforts to achieve consensus on a Programme of Work, and for the exemplary way in which he presided over the work of this Conference.

As I noted in my remarks at the opening meeting of this year's session, 2019 marks the centenary of the establishment of the League of Nations, and the 40th anniversary of the Conference on Disarmament. These anniversaries give us an opportunity to reflect on the past and future of disarmament diplomacy in Geneva. In connection with the High Level Segment of this Conference, which will take place next week, the UK delegation has been working with UNODA and the UNOG Library and Archives to put together a special exhibition in the atrium outside this Chamber, looking back at some of the achievements of those hundred years. If I may be permitted a spoiler, it has not all been plain sailing. I warmly invite you all to a reception to launch the exhibition at 1pm on the Tuesday of High Level Week, 26 February, in the presence of our Secretary-General, Mr Møller.

I would also like to let you know that we have also been involved in the planning of two special discussion events on the history and future of disarmament diplomacy in Geneva, which may be of interest to delegations. The first, in collaboration with UNIDIR, will take place at 1pm on the Wednesday of High Level Week, 27 February, in Room VIII. The second, which forms part of the series of Library Talks organised by the UN Library in Geneva, will take place at 12.30pm on Tuesday 5 March.

Dear colleagues,

I would now like to share with you some ideas for how we might proceed with our work over the coming four weeks.

As I said on Friday, in the last meeting of the Ukrainian Presidency, I intend to continue to consult delegations to see whether there might be a way to finding consensus on a Programme of Work. I am under no illusions; there is a reason why this has proved elusive for more than twenty years, and the debate on the drafts presented by the Ukrainian Presidency has shown that it is likely to remain so. But I have heard clearly the desire
amongst delegations to build on the substantive and valuable work we did in this Conference last year. To do that, we must agree a way of structuring our work.

Today, I should like to outline some proposals for how we might do that.

It seems to me that the best way to proceed this year would be to set up new Subsidiary Bodies as a vehicle for continuing and deepening the discussions we had last year. I propose that the Conference should create four such bodies, one for each of our core issues: nuclear disarmament, fissile material, the prevention of an arms race in outer space, and negative security assurances. Those bodies would be allocated ten meetings, an increase from seven last year. Their mandates should explicitly draw on the possible ways forward identified in the reports of the 2018 Subsidiary Bodies, where they were agreed, in order to move the conversation on from last year.

The fact that four out of the five Subsidiary Bodies set up in 2018 were able to agree reports by consensus was very welcome. But in setting up new bodies this year, we should look again at the reporting requirements. I should welcome the views of delegations on how they might be improved. I understand the need to identify consensus on commonalities and recommendations, where possible. But the value of last year’s exercise was not just in the achievement of consensus reports, but also in the rich discussions that were held on the technical and political challenges we face. We should consider how the nuance of the discussions can be best captured. The idea of introducing a formal element to the work of new Subsidiary Bodies might be a way of doing this.

Alongside the four Subsidiary Bodies, I propose appointing two Special Coordinators. The first would be tasked with examining emerging issues and new technologies and how they impact on the agenda of this Conference, building on the discussions held in Subsidiary Body 5 last year. It seems to me that these questions are better discussed in a more agile and flexible way than is possible in a Subsidiary Body.

The second Special Coordinator would be tasked with examining the question of the working methods and membership of the Conference. Many delegations have expressed the view that this would be a valuable exercise, and one that is worthwhile from time to time in any institution or organisation. I am also aware that others are cautious, fearing that it could distract us from the substance of our agenda. It seems to me that this discussion has already begun, and mandating a Special Coordinator to channel and coordinate it would ensure that we use our time in the plenary meetings and the meetings of the Subsidiary Bodies to focus on substantive issues. To ensure that this would be a neutral and open process, I propose entrusting the mandate not to an individual, but to a small group of colleagues drawn from across the regional groups, who would consult widely and report on their work, with any recommendations, to the Conference. We should bear in mind, of course, that action could only be taken on any recommendations by consensus of the whole Conference.

Dear colleagues

In a moment, I will open the floor to any delegation who wishes to make a statement on these proposals, or any other matter they deem pertinent to the work of the Conference, in our formal session. I then intend to move to an informal setting to allow delegations the opportunity to give their preliminary reactions to the ideas I have sketched out.
After listening to your comments, whether in the Chamber today, or bilaterally, or in the regional group coordination meetings tomorrow, I intend to circulate a draft Decision tomorrow afternoon, through the Secretariat, in order to facilitate your consultations with your capitals. I would then suggest that we meet again to discuss the proposal at a plenary session on the morning of Thursday 28 February, following the High-Level Segment. I hope this will be ample time to formulate your views and additional suggestions, and that we can make progress reasonably quickly thereafter.

I look forward to working with you all to move our work ahead this year. We can, after all, only proceed together.

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