Mr President, distinguished Ambassador Walid Doudech,
Mr. Secretary General Michael Møller,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,

Civilians fleeing bombed cities, chemical weapons being used again, threats with nuclear weapons, we see it every day that disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control are indispensable for global security. Global challenges cannot be solved unilaterally. The rules-based global order is irreplaceable for a peaceful and prosperous globalized world. Effective multilateralism benefits collective security and thus us all. Looking at the world this is certainly urgently needed. Therefore multilateral disarmament remains a longstanding priority of Austria’s foreign policy.

Many of these pressing issues are dealt with by the Conference on Disarmament (CD). I am delighted to address you here today, thereby underlining Austria’s firm commitment to this august body that was set up to negotiate disarmament treaties. And it is high time for this body to return to doing so. For the current situation is grim.

As the UN Secretary General observes with concern in his important new disarmament agenda, we are witnessing increasing militarization in many parts of the world. Just look at the more than twofold increase of global military spending since the end of the Cold War. The more money is invested in weaponry, the less remains for fundamental areas such as economic and social development. The resulting poverty and social unrest are not only an evil in themselves. They also undermine security. So states react by accumulating even more weaponry instilling further distrust and fostering conflict. In this way, the world is caught up in a vicious circle.

Take nuclear weapons. They threaten our very existence. And yet modernization programs are being undertaken leading to a new arms race triggering more tensions and a heightened risk for all of us. Due to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of a nuclear weapon explosion, be it by accident, design or miscalculation, these weapons cannot provide security.
Acknowledging the uniquely destructive, threatening and destabilizing effect of nuclear weapons, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), adopted fifty years ago, established a legal obligation for nuclear disarmament with the goal of a nuclear weapon free world. Austria is fully committed to this core objective of the NPT and to the treaty as a whole, representing the cornerstone of the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. Currently our objective is to contribute to making the NPT’s 2020 Review Conference a success.

As to non-proliferation, the NPT has certainly served us all well in helping contain an uncontrolled spread of nuclear weapons. Without the treaty, the world would be an even more dangerous place. Unfortunately, one State, the DPRK has withdrawn from this landmark agreement, developed nuclear weapons and tested them which has led to a dangerous escalation. Austria has condemned these tests as well as those of missiles. Today, I welcome the US-DPRK Summit, an important step into the right direction. Building on the positive outcome of this historic meeting, further diplomatic efforts should bring about the denuclearization of and lasting peace to the Korean Peninsula.

The claim of some States that they need nuclear weapons for their security will always induce others to also want them. This is how non-proliferation and disarmament, the two pillars of the NPT, are linked with each other. So barring a decisive breakthrough towards a nuclear weapon free world, proliferation crises like the most recent one relating to the DPRK’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs could unfortunately haunt us again.

At the same time, the world continues to face a number of other serious situations involving States possessing nuclear weapons. The fact is that any of these situations may escalate into a nuclear catastrophe any time. The only way to eliminate this unacceptable risk is to get rid of nuclear weapons altogether. Or as the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon once remarked, “there are no right hands for the wrong weapons”.

Mr President,

Here in Geneva, this body elaborated the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996. Let me use the opportunity to urge those States represented here which have not yet ratified this very important treaty to do so without further delay, so that it can finally enter into force.

I commend past progress in nuclear disarmament such as the completion of the reductions under the New START Treaty last February and call on the Russian Federation and the United States to extend this treaty and start negotiations on further cuts.
About 14,500 nuclear weapons in existence today are still more than sufficient to wipe humanity off the surface of the earth several times over. The threat of nuclear war with the unacceptable humanitarian impact it would bring seems even more acute today than at the time of the Cold War. In comparison, nowadays more actors possess nuclear weapons, and these actors interact with each other in an international environment which has become more complicated, less predictable and therefore more fraught with security risks.

Against this dark background there is hope in the form of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This historic agreement adopted last year represents a powerful signal that the overwhelming majority of the world’s States is not willing to accept the precarious nuclear status quo any longer. Finally the most abhorrent weapon of mass destruction is prohibited just like biological and chemical weapons. I am proud to say that my country Austria has been at the forefront of the broad international movement which produced the TPNW. The new treaty is fully compatible with the existing international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime. Specifically, the TPNW strengthens the NPT and is indispensable for the full implementation of Article VI of the latter. Austria has deposited its instrument of ratification in May and I call on all States represented here to join the growing community of TPNW signatories and ratifiers.

Mr President,

As I am speaking here an Extraordinary Meeting of the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapon Convention is taking place in The Hague. I am deeply concerned by the use of chemical weapons in Syria as well as in some other places, which Austria fully and unreservedly condemns. Any such act constitutes a gross violation of the obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, like the CTBT another important achievement of the CD. The OPCW can already clarify which chemical substance was used. But beyond that, those who have committed the violation have to be identified by an impartial multilateral attribution mechanism. Since the United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism has not been prolonged by the Security Council, this function should be fulfilled by a new mechanism to be established in the framework of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. And finally the perpetrators should be held accountable. Therefore I commend and support the initiative taken by France to end the impunity for those responsible for the use of chemical weapons. What is at stake is upholding the international norm against chemical weapons and ultimately a rules-based international order.

Mr President,

In recent years, significant progress has been achieved to reduce the horrendous impact of conventional weapons on civilians, notably through implementation of the Conventions against Antipersonnel Mines as well as against Cluster Munitions. Let me use this
opportunity to call on those States which have not yet done so to accede to these two important conventions.

Still far too many people all over the world fall victim to conventional weapons. As the UN Secretary General points out in the section entitled “disarmament to save lives” of his new groundbreaking document, a particular concern is related to the urbanization of armed conflict with its devastating and well-documented impacts on civilians. These are mainly a consequence of the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effect in populated areas. I am grateful that this pressing humanitarian issue continues to be high on the agenda of the United Nations as it is for my country. The use of explosive weapons by armed forces but also by non-State actors in conflicts all over the world currently leads to numerous and grave violations of international humanitarian law, resulting in tens of thousands of civilian deaths annually. In my previous career I have taught International Humanitarian Law and I was shocked to learn that 92% of victims are civilians. What we need therefore is a concerted effort of the international community to promote a stricter observance of IHL. Austria will continue its efforts to address this issue aiming at a political declaration.

Throughout history, warfare has always been closely linked to technological innovation. One of the current examples of this symbiotic relationship is the introduction of artificial intelligence into the military field. The key problem of this development under way is the possibility to design weapons capable of selecting and killing adversaries without a human actor necessarily involved in the operation.

The ethical, political and legal questions raised by this prospect are serious and we need to act before such weapon systems are introduced. For compliance with International Humanitarian Law it is essential to preserve meaningful human control over their critical functions, notably identifying, selecting and applying force to targets. In order not to be overtaken by undesirable developments in the near future, Austria is in favor of negotiating now a preventive prohibition of autonomous weapons systems which lack meaningful human control over critical functions.

Mr President,

As we see from the manifold challenges in disarmament the CD has to overcome 20 years of self-imposed blockage and fulfil again its mandate to bring about multilateral disarmament treaties.

Certainly it is not the excellent and dedicated delegates and staff of the CD that have to be blamed. We have to make this august body fit for the 21st century. We have to find ways to include the input of and have a real dialogue with civil society and academia, to enlarge membership to be truly representative and to halt an interpretation of consensus that hinders any decision making.
The CD does not exist in isolation and reflects broader trends in international politics. Since a number of years now, some States have come to perceive their relations with each other increasingly in terms of competition, rather than cooperation. According to this mindset, unilateral solutions are preferred over multilateral ones. They strive to achieve security against rather than together with other States. They seek protection by directing weapons at each other instead of investing in friendly relations. But we have moved on since the dark days of the cold war. Today’s interconnected world necessitates global, rather than national solutions. Not sterile competition but only cooperation holds promise for success. Therefore Austria stands for effective multilateralism.

I thank you Mr President.