

Ambassador Wood Remarks to the Conference on Disarmament
Plenary Thematic Debate on Agenda Item 2
Prevention of Nuclear War & All Related Matters:
Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty
Thursday, May 20, 2021

Mr. President, thank you for convening this session, on one of the most important issues that the CD was created to address.

I would like to thank our panelists for their substantive presentations and I would like to give a specific shoutout to my old friend Laura Rockwood.

The U.S. position on an FMCT is well known and has not changed.

We continue to support the immediate commencement of FMCT negotiations, on the basis of consensus, and with the participation of all key states.

These are the very conditions that the CD was established to satisfy.

The United States realizes that reaching consensus on an FMCT may be difficult, but that is not a reason not to begin negotiations.

For example, while the United States remains opposed to including existing stockpiles of fissile material, we understand that others have different views. We also accept that stockpiles will be debated, regardless of the wording of the negotiating mandate.

Therefore, we are open to new and creative proposals for a negotiating mandate, as long as that mandate does not pre-judge the outcome by explicitly mandating the inclusion of existing stocks.

Moving forward, we must remind ourselves that the principal purpose of an FMCT is to prohibit the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons in order to cap current stockpiles.

Achieving this outcome alone would be an essential step forward in global nonproliferation efforts.

It would also help prevent a future nuclear arms race, thereby making the security environment more conducive to even further steps on nuclear disarmament.

The CD is the best place for FMCT negotiations to happen. We have the negotiating mandate. We are governed by consensus. And the key states are already in the room.

The fact that the CD has failed to start FMCT negotiations is not for want of trying.

A number of countries, including the United States, have suggested solutions for breaking the two-decade-long stalemate.

CD Presidents have proposed draft Programs of Work that included FMCT negotiations.

The UN General Assembly established a GGE – then a second preparatory group of experts to lay the groundwork for negotiations.

And, finally, we discussed an FMCT in 2018's Subsidiary Body 2.

The fact is that our lack of progress on FMCT reflects major differences on one key point.

A select few countries continue to want to increase their stocks of fissile material for nuclear weapons – or at least maintain the option to do so – even as they express conditional support for negotiations.

Recognizing this reality, Mr. President, the United States reiterates our call for all states that have not yet done so to declare a moratorium on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.

Such a moratorium is one of the essential steps toward an FMCT, and nuclear disarmament more generally.

It is a concrete demonstration of commitment to an FMCT and would be an immensely meaningful confidence-building measure for nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states alike.

A moratorium is also one example of an “effective measure” to create an environment that is conducive to future nuclear disarmament, as outlined in Article VI of the NPT.

Some have argued that a moratorium would reduce incentives for negotiating a treaty. The reality is that their refusal to cap their own stockpiles has led to the current impasse.

For our part, the United States remains committed to maintaining our moratorium on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons, which has been in effect since the early 1990s.

The United Kingdom, France, and Russia have similar moratoria in place.

We call on China to join us and make this a P5 commitment.

I also note that significant progress has already been made in addressing existing stocks.

The United States started in the mid-1990s to remove 374 metric tons of highly enriched uranium and 61.5 metric tons of plutonium from use in nuclear weapons.

In addition, we have down-blended more than 164 metric tons of highly and low enriched uranium for civilian use.

These are but a few of the tangible steps the United States has already taken to reduce the amount of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons.

None of that progress would have been possible if we had insisted on linking such steps to the negotiation of an FMCT.

Mr. President, I have made all of these points before. Many of us have.

I am in my seventh year representing the United States at the CD – so I say with confidence that despite the fact that this is the one topic that the majority of CD Member States believe is most ready for negotiation, we are getting further and further from that goal.

Not only are we barred from negotiating a critical component of the global nonproliferation and disarmament agenda, but this year we could not even agree to an oblique reference to FMCT in a decision to convene subsidiary bodies.

This is not a sustainable way to do business.

If we can't even mention a treaty, we will certainly never negotiate one. And – in light of this situation – the idea that we could somehow negotiate multiple treaties covering all our agenda items at once is simply not practical.

Mr. President, ending the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons has a tangible impact on the broader international security environment. Our inability even to talk about an FMCT after more than two decades in limbo is a sign of how that environment has regrettably deteriorated.

A modest step in reversing that deterioration – and setting the stage for successful FMCT negotiations – would be the voluntary moratoria on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons that I spoke about earlier.

To that end, I reiterate our call on all those who have not declared and maintained such a moratorium to take that step now.

Thank you, Mr. President.