Agenda Item 70:

General and complete disarmament (continued)
General debate (continued)  

Chairman: Mr. Franz MATSCH (Austria).

AGENDA ITEM 70
General and complete disarmament (A/4218, A/4219, A/C.1/818, A/C.1/820) (continued)

GENERAL DEBATE (continued)

1. The CHAIRMAN noted that various suggestions had been made in the First Committee concerning the manner in which the General Assembly should deal with the item under consideration. Some representatives thought that the Assembly's objective should be to secure agreement in principle on all aspects of the problem of general and complete disarmament. Others felt that the specific proposals should be referred to the new ten-Power disarmament committee. Still others felt that the Assembly should give expression to the great hopes raised by the presentation of new disarmament proposals. Finally, one representative thought that the Members of the General Assembly should exchange views and bear the statements of the parties primarily concerned, but that no vote should be taken on any resolution of substance.

2. Mr. PALAMAS (Greece) said that the USSR proposal (A/4219) deserved most careful study despite the fact that it was not new in substance. He did not share the pessimism of those who saw in it no more than a propaganda move; it carried the weight of a proposal made by the Head of the USSR Government, Mr. Khrushchev, in person before the General Assembly (799th plenary meeting). Moreover, the mere fact that the Soviet Government was envisaging the possibility of total disarmament within four years at a time when there were still many crucial international problems to be solved proved that it was optimistic, and that should be taken as a hopeful sign. More than ever before, nations should be receptive to any new approach to a solution of the disarmament deadlock, however daring and revolutionary it might appear.

3. The Soviet proposal assumed that disarmament was exclusively a military problem and consequently advocated a military solution. In reality, the arms race and disarmament were the military expression of a problem which was essentially political in nature: the problem of security. Nations had always sought adequate protection against any impairment of their freedom and independence; they were prepared for every sacrifice to preserve their moral and spiritual heritage and their economic and social institutions; they had always relied on arms to protect themselves against aggression and the danger of war. War had never been an end in itself; it had been generated by national and ideological antagonisms and used as an instrument of national ambitions or, in self-defence, to safeguard legitimate national interests. War was an effect, not a cause, of the use of violence; the decision to wage war was taken not because the weapons of war were available, but because nations had the will and found the justification for it. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect to ensure permanent peace by abolishing the instruments of war. In a crisis, nations would not hesitate to use the most effective weapons which they possessed or could produce, even at the risk of violating international agreements.

4. The Soviet plan, which dealt with the military aspect of general and complete disarmament, therefore needed to be supplemented by a political and constitutional plan for general and total disarmament. Under such a plan, procedures would be worked out for preventing disputes from arising, for settling them peacefully, for making arbitration compulsory and for providing the international community with the means to interfere and enforce the decision of an international authority when parties failed to comply with the established rules. The need for a political counterpart of its military disarmament proposal had apparently been recognized by the Soviet Union when the representative of that country had hinted that the United Nations might constitute the political framework in which total disarmament could be carried out. However, international security was based on collective action, and it had to be remembered that the States Members of the United Nations retained their full national sovereignty. The United States representative had also pointed out (1027th meeting) that the political aspect of the disarmament problem warranted thorough investigation and had suggested that the Disarmament Commission might undertake that task. Greece supported that suggestion and would endorse any proposals toward that end.

5. The United Nations should be strengthened and adapted to the new situation arising from the adoption of the Soviet or any other plan for total disarmament. The adoption of the Soviet plan would have a powerful impact on one of the basic principles of the United Nations, namely, the principle of national sovereignty. Indeed, the whole system of collective security now based on military alliances authorized under the self-defense provisions of Article 51 of the Charter would become pointless. On the other hand, even if all weapons were abolished, large countries could still move armies of men across their borders into smaller countries.

6. Nevertheless, if, as Mr. Khrushchev had stated at a press conference on 27 September 1959, the problem of secrecy would disappear when general and complete disarmament was achieved, and inspectors and control teams could go anywhere, see everything and control all activities within and between nations, national
sovereignty would necessarily be destroyed. A system of complete control would make deep inroads in the national life of every country. In order to ensure that a nation was stripped of every means, existing and potential, of waging war, control would have to be exercised, not only over military establishments and units, but over all economic and industrial activities.

7. The purpose of effective international control of disarmament was to prevent violations and to detect and punish them. The problem was to determine who was to take punitive action. A central military authority would have to be established to assume that responsibility and to protect the lawful members of the international community against violators by imposing law and order.

8. The Greek delegation endorsed the suggestion that the Soviet plan and the United Kingdom disarmament proposal (A/C.1/4820), as well as any other proposals concerning the military aspect of the problem, should be considered by the ten-Power disarmament committee. The Chairman of the United Nations Disarmament Commission, Mr. Padilla Nervo, should represent the Secretary-General at the forthcoming meetings of that Committee. In the meantime, the political counterpart of the military plans for total disarmament should be considered by the Disarmament Commission or a group of experts appointed by it. Such a balanced approach to the problem gave hope of some results.

9. Mr. BRUCAN (Romania) emphasized that, since there was agreement among the nations primarily concerned that general and complete disarmament was an objective, it was worth exploring and, since there was agreement that it was fully in accordance with the principles of the Charter and with the United Nations' responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, that agreement in principle should be embodied in a United Nations resolution. In that connexion, he recalled that a draft resolution expressing agreement in principle on the cessation of nuclear tests had failed to obtain the required majority at the General Assembly's thirteenth session (A/C.1/L.203), yet only a few months after the close of the session, the three nuclear Powers had agreed on that principle. Romania would participate in the work of the ten-Power disarmament committee, and was convinced that the position of that organ would be considerably strengthened by a United Nations resolution supporting general and complete disarmament.

10. The Soviet proposal was one of major significance; it was a timely appeal to all nations, and particularly to the great Powers, to halt the deadly arms race and reverse the trend towards another war and the vicious circle of military rivalry. The grip of the arms race was so strong that influential quarters interpreted foreign policy almost exclusively in terms of military technology, although there was a growing awareness that the determining factors in the international contest were likely to be non-military. Those quarters held the view, for example, that the NATO Powers should not negotiate and agree on a programme for disarming unless they regained a position of strength.

11. Partial measures of disarmament, though useful in themselves, would not bring the arms race to an end. Under conditions of increasing military rivalry, even partial measures might lose their impact and the desire of one rival to reach an agreement limited to a specific item might be suspiciously viewed as an attempt to obtain an advantage to the detriment of the other rivals. On the other hand, once all States agreed on the final objective of general and complete disarmament, any effort to revive military rivalry would become pointless. Nothing less than full endorsement of that objective could have a decisive impact on the arms race.

12. The United Kingdom proposal deserved special consideration because it contained some provisions which went further than any previous Western disarmament programme. However, if it were adopted, it would not put an end to the arms race. For instance, during its first stage, largely devoted to research and study, no reductions would be made either in weapons stocks, armed forces or military budgets presumably for several years. Moreover, in the absence of a binding agreement on the final objective to be achieved, the States directly concerned were free to adjust the balance of armaments as they saw fit, and if a new weapon should be discovered during the research period, the studies and control organs would become outmoded.

13. The most important element of the problem of control was a clear prior understanding of what was to be controlled. Control should not be put before actual disarmament, as the Geneva Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Weapons Tests had shown. Until agreement had been reached at Geneva on the principle of a cessation, it had been virtually impossible to deal with the matter of control machinery. Indeed, negotiations on control and inspection were being resumed in Geneva, while the actual disarmament measure—namely, the cessation of tests—had already been decided upon and was being temporarily enforced.

14. The socialist countries were no less concerned with adequate control than the Western Powers. Any fruitful discussion of the disarmament problem should proceed from the assumption that all parties were entitled to display vigilance in respect of the observance of international commitments, and the view that one party was less interested in control was unwarranted. The socialist countries maintained that agreement on disarmament measures must come first because only thus could the parties clearly understand what they had to control and what control machinery might be required. Once that agreement had been reached, an adequate system of control could be worked out jointly by those primarily concerned, and proposals for the improvement of the Soviet control plan could be discussed.

15. The real danger threatening mankind did not lie in the fact that one side or the other was ahead in certain armaments, but in the refusal of certain influential circles to abandon the idea that political aims could be achieved by means of war and to acknowledge that scientific and technological developments had rendered obsolete, not only the means of waging war of the fifties, but the way of thinking which went with them. It was thus certain that realistic to recognize the existence of powerful forces pushing the world toward another war and to weigh their impact on world affairs, it was not realistic to yield to those forces and to condition minds and actions to that distorted concept of realism. The concern of nations should logically be, not what would happen in a world bereft of arms, but what would happen in one which remained armed to the teeth.
16. Mr. MOCH (France) said that his delegation would not present a complete plan for disarmament, since the Committee would not have time at the present session to consider various plans and combine them in a form acceptable to all. The members would undoubtedly agree to refer all proposals to the ten-Power disarmament committee scheduled to convene shortly at Geneva, which offered the chief hope for progress towards disarmament after a two-year interruption in negotiations. France, which had suffered greatly in the two World Wars, would not reject without examination any proposal for disarmament, either general or partial, and that it was the Committee's duty to seek out in the various proposals those elements that would lend themselves to general agreement.

17. Three principles should be borne in mind in the First Committee's present approach to the disarmament problem.

18. First of all, the advent of rockets and satellites had created, since the interruption of disarmament talks in 1957, a new technological situation which had greatly aggravated existing dangers and had made it possible for total war to be unleashed by accident or error. As a result of past refusal to compromise on a plan for banning the production of nuclear weapons, a "point of no return" in that area, beyond which effective control measures were no longer practicable, had already been passed. Little that error be repeated in dealing with the most recent problems, the highest priority should be given to measures prohibiting the development, the manufacture and the stockpiling of all vehicles for the delivery of nuclear devices: satellites, rockets, supersonic or long-range aircraft, ocean-going submarines, aircraft carriers, launching pads, etc. Once the principle of priority was agreed to, any method for applying such measures would be acceptable. Speaking in general terms, the first stage in such a scheme could call for reporting arms programmes and stockpiles to the international disarmament organ, the second for prior notice and control of tests, and the third for the prohibition, destruction and control of stockpiles, factories and other basic facilities, leaving only certain approved aerial and naval weapons adequate to meet the needs of internal security and the obligations imposed by the Charter of the United Nations.

19. With regard to disarmament in other fields, the technological developments of the past two years had altered the order of priority called for by disarmament operations. The advent of nuclear weapons had diminished the importance of conventional weapons and large armies; the reduction of armed forces was now a reflection of the increasing modernization and destructiveness of weapons rather than an effort to disarm. The representatives at Geneva should be guided by that fact in determining their order of priorities.

20. The second principle guiding his delegation was that, despite the swift evolution of military technology, it was essential to avoid upsetting existing military parities in the process of disarmament operations and thereby strengthening the security of some States to the detriment of others. The question of priorities should not be the sole consideration; it was also necessary to integrate operations in the various technological areas of disarmament so that, at each stage, the security of all States would be enhanced. A further essential factor was control—not the "control without disarmament" to which the Soviet representative objected and which France also opposed, but control of disarmament, the purpose of which was to eliminate distrust by giving every State the assurance that the others were faithfully fulfilling their obligations. France totally rejected the Soviet thesis that full control would serve merely to heighten distrust and should therefore be deferred until disarmament was complete.

21. The third principle was that the Committee must abandon academic debate and produce concrete results by reconciling the intransigently held positions of the past. For example, during a first stage of disarmament involving only the reporting, limitation and "freezing" of weapons, it might be possible to rely entirely on the good faith of States and do without on-the-spot control; that would be only a limited measure, but it would mark a halt in the arms race and have a considerable psychological effect. In the second stage, inspection could be limited strictly in accordance with the disarmament measures introduced at that point. Full control would be set up only at the third stage.

22. Although prohibitions of disarmament, along the lines of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, with which had only moral force but were not subject to control were not sufficient to eliminate distrust, the importance attached to such declarations by the Soviet delegation should be borne in mind; an undertaking of that nature could be included in an over-all disarmament plan once other measures, subject to control, had helped to restore some measure of international confidence. It was thus possible to conceive of a plan based on the present technological state of armaments as well as on the wishes expressed by the various delegations. It was to be hoped that the ten-Power Committee would approach the problem in that spirit of conciliation.

23. He did not intend to examine in detail the plan submitted by the United Kingdom, which was based in part on earlier Franco-British proposals, or that of the Soviet Union, whose scheme for total disarmament could not be realized until an international force had been set up to enforce the peace. The two plans coincided only in failing to give sufficient priority to the destruction of nuclear weapons carriers; the United Kingdom proposal dealt with the matter only incidentally in connexion with the second stage of disarmament, while the Soviet proposal treated it only in connexion with the third stage.

24. In discussing the Soviet plan, he wished to confine himself to the formula proposed for control and the sweeping nature of the plan. With respect to the USSR formula for control, it was impossible to await the third stage of disarmament, by which time all armies and military installations would have been abolished, before establishing an international control body to supervise the implementation of disarmament measures; to rely solely on the good faith of States during the interim period was inconceivable. However, the Soviet plan itself envisaged the reduction of the strength of armed forces "under appropriate control" as early as the beginning of the first stage, thus implying the establishment of a system of international inspection from the very outset of the disarmament operation; that suggested the possibility of a compromise solution along the lines he had already suggested, calling

25. With regard to the sweeping nature of the Soviet proposal, everyone surely agreed that total disarmament would bring great political and economic benefits to the world. It would, in particular, permit increased aid to the under-developed countries, a field in which France had played a very prominent part. The question remained whether total disarmament was realistic and workable at the present time. The argument that military service had moral value as a school of courage and discipline should be rejected outright. There were other, less dangerous ways of instilling such virtues in young men, and, although there must be armies so long as distrust existed, they could readily be dispensed with in a world at peace. The chief problem was that the abolition of armies must proceed simultaneously with the ending of antagonisms, and he did not share the Soviet delegation’s faith that the heritage of thousands of years of war and of many decades of distrust could be wiped out in four years.

26. The Soviet proposal, which did not appear to be inflexible, should be referred to the ten-Power committee together with the United Kingdom plan and the French suggestions. That Committee should also be reminded of the value of assigning specific problems to groups of experts for technical study—a point not invalidated by the suspension after six weeks of the Conference of Experts for the study of possible measures which might be helpful in preventing surprise attack. Although considerations of realism had limited the size of the new disarmament committee, all members of the First Committee supported its forthcoming endeavours and hoped to be presented next year with a broadly based plan that would deliver men from fear and bring them greater prosperity.

27. Mr. BISBE (Cuba) said that it was encouraging to see the first signs that understanding was being reached and progress made in matters of disarmament. It was particularly gratifying that the First Committee had unanimously adopted the President’s proposal to place the item of general and complete disarmament first on its agenda (1025th meeting).

28. Never before had peace been so arduously desired as in the present age when the development of nuclear weapons and missiles made the total destruction of mankind and human civilization a very real danger. The realization that, after a world nuclear conflict, there would be neither victors nor vanquished, had made a solution of the disarmament problem imperative and had led to a turning-point in the foreign policies of the great Powers.

29. The Cuban delegation had doubted the wisdom of the decision of the Foreign Ministers to establish the ten-Power disarmament committee to negotiate the question of disarmament, since it might impair the authority of the United Nations. The main responsibility for disarmament measures clearly rested with the Organization and the Cuban delegation had accordingly expressed concern at the growing tendency to discuss serious world issues outside the United Nations and to resort to limited or even bilateral negotiations in place of multilateral discussion. It was also a dangerous trend because the smaller nations, which would suffer just as much from a world conflict as the great Powers, were prevented from stating their views.

30. However, in the final analysis, the primary consideration was the achievement of a solution to the disarmament problem, and not the manner of its achievement. People were weary of disarmament discussions—whether they were conducted in a Utopian or a realistic spirit—which provided no solution. However, if the ideas put forward in the United Nations could be reflected in agreements brought about by the ten-Power disarmament committee, then that body should be welcomed as a means of advancing the cause of lasting peace.

31. Undeniably the fact that one of the two greatest world Powers had made a declaration of the kind issued by the Soviet Union was of the utmost significance. Apart from opening up vistas of an ideal world to come, that statement drew attention to the vast possibilities for constructive and peaceful work that would be provided if all the economic and human resources now employed for military purposes could be released. However, in Utopia it might seem, the Soviet plan could not be underestimated or dismissed as a mere propaganda move.

32. The Cuban delegation could not reject the idea of general and complete disarmament in principle. Such an ideal seemed well-nigh impossible to achieve without altering the very nature of the human species, but it was none the less a salutary one. Furthermore, the country which had made the proposal stated that it did not dismiss the more realistic prospect of gradual disarmament. Accordingly, there was every reason to believe that a favourable juncture had been reached for fruitful discussions.

33. The Soviet proposals had elicited favourable reactions as well as criticism. The United States representative had said that the United States would be unflagging in its determination to attain results. The Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom had submitted (798th plenary meeting) a plan for gradual disarmament which should be studied jointly with the Soviet plan and the French Minister of Foreign Affairs (814th plenary meeting) had also made encouraging statements.

34. The disarmament question centred around the crucial issue of control or inspection. Control was necessary because there was a lack of confidence and because only controlled disarmament could build up the necessary confidence for the future. In that respect the Cuban delegation fully supported the view held by the Western Powers. Unfortunately an impasse had been reached on a matter of form. While the Western Powers considered that a disarmament agreement should be subject to agreements on control, the Soviet Union put prior emphasis on the question of disarmament and considered measures of inspection or control secondary. Since disarmament clearly had to be accompanied by controls, the present impasse seemed absurd. The solution surely lay in striking a balance between the two. It was unthinkable that the Soviet Union would reject the idea of control, since it did so, the obvious conclusion would be that it did not want disarmament. The Soviet representative in the Committee had indicated that his Government had repeatedly advanced proposals for establishing appropriate systems of control and inspection over disarmament measures. However the Soviet Union’s fears that control without disarmament would serve purposes of military intelligence were surely groundless. It would be absurd to suggest that any Power could agree to a system of control without disarmament. What was important was to ascertain if the prospect of an agreement was any nearer. The
answer had been provided by Mr. Lodge who, when he had mentioned that an agreement had been reached on the suspension of nuclear tests and the parallel establishment of a system of control, had pointed out that the acceptance of that principle was definitely encouraging for the broader prospects of arms control.

35. Comparing the United Kingdom and Soviet disarmament plans, he observed that the United Kingdom plan was right in dealing first with nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons. However, that plan gave priority to the cessation of nuclear weapons tests and of the use of fissionable materials for manufacturing such weapons, and delegated the reduction of stocks of nuclear weapons to the second stage. That gave cause for concern since the great Powers already had sufficient stocks of atomic and hydrogen weapons to destroy mankind several times over. The United Kingdom plan was preferable to the Soviet plan in that its first stage constituted the final stage of the Soviet plan. If the danger confronting mankind was nuclear warfare, then the most urgent problem was disarmament in the field of nuclear weapons and not disarmament in that of conventional weapons. However, the Cuban delegation felt that the second stage of the United Kingdom plan should be placed first.

36. Consideration of the item on general and complete disarmament did not, however, preclude the possibility of partial measures of disarmament. Accordingly, consideration of the various plans submitted might be expected to yield positive results. It was such results that the smaller nations wished to see if they were not to conclude that all the pacific statements made were not merely another manifestation of the cold war.

37. Ideally the Cuban delegation hoped for general and complete disarmament but, failing that, it would prefer disarmament in the field of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons to no disarmament at all, since an incident in the cold war or a mere miscalculation would inevitably result in catastrophe. There was little to be gained from the mere prohibition of nuclear weapons tests. The proper solution lay in destroying existing stocks of nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons and in stopping their production altogether, with an appropriate system of inspection. All the smaller nations would surely support the Cuban delegation in seeking such a solution.

38. Disarmament should also be extended to large armies and conventional weapons, but only as a secondary measure. The Cuban delegation similarly welcomed the suggestion made by the representative of Greece concerning the nomination of Mr. Padilla Nervo as Chairman of the Disarmament Commission, to serve as a link between the United Nations and the ten-Power Disarmament Committee.

39. The recent discussions between the President of the United States and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union certainly gave cause for fresh hope. It was idle to speculate whether the Soviet proposal had been made in good faith or whether the principle of peaceful coexistence was compatible with the policies enunciated by Lenin. The main considerations were whether peaceful coexistence was now possible in the light of new developments and whether scientific achievements and economic resources could be used exclusively for peaceful purposes in the future.

The meeting rose at 1.10 p.m.