The United Nations and Disarmament
In an Age of Globalization

By

Angela Kane
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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I would like to begin my remarks today with three words of thanks.

First of all, I thank Ms. Sophia Clementi for inviting me to address this event organized by Yale’s International Relations Association.

Second, I thank all of you for the interest you have shown in the field of international relations. Though you have come from many lands, I am sure that in each of you are facing many domestic issues competing for your attention these days, and I am glad that you recognize the need to understand what is going on in other countries. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent through the process of globalization, you will find this knowledge to be invaluable.

And third, I am deeply pleased that you have invited me to speak specifically on the United Nations and Disarmament, the two loves of my professional life. Yet I am not here for selfish reasons, but because I do believe that to a very large and under-appreciated extent, the future of international peace and security will be profoundly influenced—if not in good measure determined by—the fate of disarmament efforts on a global scale.

Now I know that many of you might view this as an exaggeration. Some of you might regard disarmament as an old-fashioned term—a relic of the Cold War. Some might think that disarmament is a fools-errand, a will o’ the wisp, a kind of utopian dream or fantasy. And still others might even view disarmament as actually a danger in itself—a well-intentioned but misguided activity that, if achieved, would leave States naked and defenseless in a hostile and unpredictable world.

I do not of course believe that many of you do in fact hold such views, but you might—or at the very least you will certainly encounter people who think of themselves as experts espousing such views with the highest level of confidence that often comes with only the highest level of ignorance.

So I have a great challenge today. I have to convince all of the doubters in this audience why disarmament matters, why what the UN is doing in this field matters, and why each of you potentially have your own roles to play in advancing this great cause.

Let me begin by paying tribute to history, because what we do today at the UN in disarmament is very much influenced by our official mandates and our past efforts in this great field. Please bear with me, because without knowing something about our past, it becomes next to impossible to explain both what is going on at the UN today and what are its potential contributions in the future.

Disarmament is, first and foremost, one of the UN’s oldest and most durable goals. The term appears twice in the UN Charter—which we should recall was adopted before
the first nuclear weapon was even tested. The first resolution adopted by the General Assembly established on 24 January 1946 the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons and all other weapons “adaptable to mass destruction”, later called WMD. The origins of that famous acronym can be traced back to that resolution. Other words that appear in the Charter include the phrase “regulation of armaments”, which the General Assembly later defined as the limitation or reduction of conventional arms—you know, weapons commonly found in militaries around the world used for widely accepted purposes of self defence, including tanks, artillery, naval vessels, military aircraft, et cetera. While States have a right to have such weapons for self-defence, they have also long recognized the need for some constraints in their production and trade.

So the first point I would like to make is that the UN has for some 67 years been pursuing a two-track approach, one often labelled by its very misleading term “general and complete disarmament under effective international control.” This mouthful of a concept simply refers to the twin aims of prohibiting and eliminating WMD, while limiting and regulating conventional arms.

These are viewed at the UN as mutually reinforcing goals for reasons of basic common sense. Think about it for a minute. Imagine we could snap our fingers and all WMD would disappear. Would the world instantly turn into a Nirvana, with no war, no armed violence inside countries, and no terrorism? Of course not. Some risks to national and international peace and security would persist and new dangers would arise from the remaining weapons, especially if left totally uncontrolled.

These new dangers could take the form of conventional arms races, globally or regionally. Research and development could produce revolutionary new conventional arms whose lethality and indiscriminate effects might even rival the horrible consequences of using WMD. This is why WMD disarmament and conventional arms control must proceed together, hand-in-hand, rather than pursued by any sequence following the logic of “first A, then B”.

And this is not just a logical or theoretical argument—it really does explain much of the organization of the UN Secretariat for handling these issues. Virtually from its establishment, the Secretariat has had desks handling both WMD disarmament and conventional arms regulation. The UN’s current Office for Disarmament Affairs has two separate branches dealing with these issues, which work together as their predecessors have done so for decades.

Although all UN Secretaries-General have supported these goals, and while recognizing that the Secretariat has always had some kind of office working on these issues, they represent only a small part of what we call the “UN disarmament machinery”. I have to explain what I mean by this machinery, because once you know
how it has been set up, you can better appreciate both the potential and the limitations of the UN in this field.

The most important business undertaken at the UN is the establishment, maintenance, and adaptation of multilateral norms governing the behaviour of Member States. The UN is neither a legislature nor a world government. But it does serve as a kind of “assembly line” for the construction of such norms. This is the unique “value added” by our whole institution—a mission or function that no State or coalition of States can rival.

Norms, standards, guidelines, rules, and laws are not imposed on States—they are created and adopted by States that recognize them as necessary and convenient in regulating their interactions. This applies to virtually all activities in international relations today and the UN disarmament machinery consists of various structures and arenas where disarmament norms are born and cultivated.

Stage one of this process of making disarmament norms is pure debate. This is the function of the UN Disarmament Commission, which you might think of as the UN’s “talk shop” in disarmament. Its job is to deliberate two issues—one dealing with nuclear weapons and the other relating to conventional arms—for a period of three weeks each year, and then after three years have passed, they try to reach a consensus on some non-binding recommendations or guidelines. Their last successful session was in 1999, when they adopted guidelines dealing with the establishment of nuclear-weapon-free zones and the regulation of conventional arms. Before 1999 the Commission had issued several agreed guidelines, but it has been very difficult sailing ever since due to sharp disagreements among blocks of States, largely over priorities and the means of achieving even agreed ends.

The next step up the norm-development ladder is the First Committee of the General Assembly, which considers and adopts over 50 disarmament-related resolutions each year. These are also non-binding, but are significant since—like the Disarmament Commission—both bodies are composed of all Member States. These are unique arenas where States can come together and debate even if they do not officially recognize each other. While the terms of these resolutions are also not legal obligations, States still attach considerable importance to them as political statements, as demonstrated by the meticulous care they devote during the drafting process.

The highest rung on this ladder of norms is the 65-member Conference on Disarmament (known in our business as the CD), whose mandate is to negotiate multilateral disarmament treaties. Over a period of several decades, the current Conference and its institutional predecessors were able to negotiate and bring to a conclusion the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, the Seabed Treaty, and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban
Treaty (among others). Unfortunately, the CD today is also locked in stalemate and has been unable even to adopt a programme of work for over a decade. In this case, the reason for the deadlock is the consensus rule, which holds that unless everything is agreed, nothing is agreed.

Yet in each of these arenas, progress or setbacks are less a function of the institution itself than the policies, practices, and priorities of the Member States. Resolve those, and the machinery works like a Swiss watch. One should therefore very much avoid the temptation to “blame” any one of these institutions for “failing” to advance disarmament. To the extent that disarmament has been slow to materialize, critics and analysts would be much better advised to look to the policies of States. As the saying goes, when the weather gets hot, don’t blame the thermometer.

OK, so now you know what we are expected to do at the UN in disarmament and how we are structured to do it. There are some additional details that I should mention, however, to complete this picture. Our role in disarmament is somewhat greater than just advocacy and promotion, though we do a lot of that as seen in our many publications, our meetings, conferences, exchanges with groups in civil society, and interactions with the media. We also have to monitor, analyze, and interpret both daily developments in this field as well as long-term or emerging trends. The Secretary-General relies on my Office to keep him fully and currently informed, to alert him to noteworthy future events, and to advise him on new initiatives the UN should consider launching to advance disarmament goals.

This, frankly, is an exciting business. When President Obama made his now-famous Prague speech in April 2009 on the need to pursue global nuclear disarmament, we at the UN knew quite well that this goal could never be achieved through any unilateral policy initiative, but must instead be hammered out in a fully global arena that only the UN could provide. Try to imagine the achievement of global nuclear disarmament without the multilateral norms of verification, irreversibility, transparency, universality, and bindingness in law. These types of standards did not emerge from nowhere—they were developed over many years in UN arenas. To this extent, the UN is much more than a cheerleader for disarmament. It is disarmament’s midwife—a catalyst and facilitator for progress in this field.

It is easy but very misleading to conclude that nuclear disarmament has failed because of the twin facts that some 19,000 nuclear weapons remain and no negotiations are underway to eliminate such weapons. I urge you however to put this into perspective. In the middle of the decade of the 1980s, an estimated 75,000 nuclear weapons existed—so there has been a significant decline to only a quarter of the global nuclear stockpile at the peak of the Cold War. Also, only two countries—the Russian Federation and the United States—possess about 95 per cent of the remaining weapons and their declared arsenals are continuing to shrink in numbers.
Yet great challenges remain ahead for nuclear disarmament. Well-funded, long-range programmes are underway in each possessor State to modernize nuclear bombs, warheads, their delivery vehicles, and the entire institutional infrastructure that produces and maintains such weapons. And we are not seeing any signs of a similar commitment of resources to disarmament, registered in budgets or plans. So yes, there is quite a lot of work to do and I have no doubt that the UN will have its own contributions to make in moving this disarmament agenda forward.

When the United States had an initiative to require all States to have their own national laws and policies to prevent the proliferation of WMD or their acquisition by non-State actors, it came to the UN and the Security Council adopted resolution 1540 (2004) to achieve that objective.

When China and the Russian Federation decided that the time had come to launch an initiative to conclude a treaty to prevent an arms race in outer space, they jointly introduced such a proposal in the CD.

When the Non-Aligned Movement and its supporters worldwide decided that more had to be done to outlaw nuclear weapons, they also turned to the CD as a logical venue to negotiate such a treaty. The fact that such negotiations have not yet occurred has not deterred the Movement from continuing to pursue such negotiations in the CD and to advance nuclear disarmament in other parts of the UN disarmament machinery.

When concerns arose over problems encountered in implementing nuclear safeguards in Iran, the issue was ultimately brought to the UN Security Council, which is still trying to get this issue resolved by peaceful diplomatic means, backed by the instrument of international sanctions.

When the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea tested a nuclear weapon this year (as well as in 2006 and 2009), the eyes of the world turned to the UN to see what would be the global response. While halting future tests of nuclear explosive devices by the DPRK is a decision that only that country can make, the world community has a definite interest in standing up in defence of the basic global norm against the conduct of such tests, regardless of who may be undertaking them. The UN remains the world’s indispensable venue for defending precisely such norms.

When—over six decades after the end of World War II—the world community finally decided that the time had come to negotiate a multilateral Arms Trade Treaty, it chose the United Nations to host those negotiations, which will take place this very month.
In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that both the UN and this difficult field of disarmament are entering a new age of transition—an age dominated by the inexorable unfolding of the process of globalization. We all know that only States can join the UN and that only States can conclude treaties. Yet the UN Charter, farsighted as it was, anticipated another dimension of international relations, a dimension that has as its focal point not the nation-state but the individual human being. Those of you who have read the Charter will recall that its first three words were, “We the peoples…”.

Today, people throughout the world are interacting with each other at an ever-increasing rate, and on an ever-increasing number of dimensions. Consider how social media has multiplied the effect of the written letter and telephone as a means of communication. Consider how the webs of business, trade, and finance have expanded over the years, giving each State, each business, and each individual a stake in the non-occurrence of catastrophic international wars. Consider the welcome decline in the incidence of wars between States, a development eclipsed only by the persistence of horrific armed conflicts inside States, with all their tragic consequences for security at the level of individual human beings.

In this light, I think I am on safe ground by saying that the future ability of the UN to advance disarmament goals will depend upon developments on three political levels. First, creative leadership from the nuclear-weapon-States in fulfilling their disarmament commitments. Second, persistent diplomatic efforts by highly-motivated coalitions of States, including both the non-aligned and what are called “middle power” states that have significant leadership roles at the regional level. The third level is what might be called the “grass roots”—in other words, citizen activism, and I do not mean here just the peace groups. Lawyers, doctors, mayors, parliamentarians, women’s groups, environmentalists, religious leaders, human rights activists and advocates of social and economic development really do share some common ground as a foundation for collaborative work to advance disarmament. Ask yourselves which of these groups would benefit from a nuclear war?

Now, I realize that globalization offers no panacea. Yes, people are interacting more than ever and international interdependence is growing. Yet these interactions have at times also given rise to hostile reactions in the form of nationalism, perceptions of threats to religious faiths or to cultural traditions. In addition, as trade barriers continue to crumble between States, we may well see a trend where access to various technologies or materials to make weapons of mass destruction may also increase. Many things can be done to discourage this trend, but no national export control can be expected to function with perfection—and even if it did in one State, access to prohibited items could be also be acquired elsewhere.

What is most important is to de-legitimize not just the use of WMD, but the very existence of such weaponry. The WMD “taboo” must extend to possession, not just “risk
of use”, because disarmament offers the only absolute guarantee against use. This is not just my personal opinion—this point has been explicitly accepted with respect to nuclear disarmament at both the 2000 and 2010 NPT Review Conferences.

Even individual citizens have much to contribute in achieving this kind of de-legitimization, even you in this audience today. You can get involved with groups that are working on these issues. You can write articles, op-eds, letters to newspapers, and promote your views in countless social media outlets. You can encourage your local, state, and national political leaders to join this cause. And as the world is confronting a global financial crisis, you can raise your voices on behalf of initiatives to cut back military spending, which was last year about $1.7 trillion. There are a lot better ways those resources could be spent in meeting urgent human needs.

Some of you can even come to work at the United Nations, where disarmament has lived on for several decades as what Dag Hammarskjöld once called the organization’s “hardy perennial”. Come and help us tend its garden.

I thank you all for coming today to hear about the UN and disarmament. You have much to contribute in advancing both causes. And my last words of advice on this will be—never, never give up.