The Year in Review: 
Taking Stock of New Nuclear Disarmament Initiatives

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What’s Next on the Nuclear Disarmament Front?
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I want at the outset to thank my friends Bill Potter and Ambassador Desra Percaya and their staffs who have assisted in organizing this latest round of Disarmament Dialogue. Their determination and persistence in supporting progress in disarmament and non-proliferation represent what is most needed right now in this field—a welcome combination of energy and vision. These are the most effective antidotes to complacency and despair.

As the history of nuclear disarmament goes, this has not been that bad a year for nuclear disarmament. Oh it could certainly be better, but progress has been so slow and uneven in the past that it is both refreshing and somewhat reassuring to witness a series this year of disarmament initiatives gaining such support worldwide.

I don’t intend to linger here on the disappointments and setbacks. Everybody in this room recognizes them when they see them. The still-massive arsenals. The stubborn persistence of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. High-alert nuclear postures. First-use policies. Weapons deployed in non-nuclear-weapon States. Long-term weapon modernization programmes. The lack of disarmament agencies, policies, budgets, plans, and timetables. It’s a long list.

Earlier this month I observed to the First Committee that the UN stands on the banks of the East River, whose current flows in two different directions each day. The history of disarmament, it seems, has followed a similar course. One year we see small steps forward. The next year new dimensions of a nuclear arms race appear.

The questions before us all right now are, where is this current now taking us and how can we channel it to the destination desired by the overwhelming majority of Member States?

It would be hard to dispute that the growing interest in the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has become a rising tide for disarmament efforts worldwide. This was of course apparent in language adopted at the 2010 NPT Review Conference and echoed unambiguously at the Oslo conference last March on this subject. The growing interest in placing the humanitarian dimension at the heart of disarmament discussions was also clearly evident in the statement delivered by New Zealand on behalf of 124 States in the First Committee just this week.

The business-like, open, and productive deliberations of the Open Ended Working Group this summer succeeded in identifying possible initiatives to advance disarmament, while also enabling civil society to participate through its inclusive process. When I consider the sheer number of civil society initiatives now underway around the world in this field, this is reassuring evidence indeed that disarmament is alive and well in the consciences of billions upon billions of peoples of the United Nations. This is a certainly a political foundation on which to build.

I also viewed the General Assembly’s first-ever High Level Meeting on nuclear disarmament as a positive step forward, as demonstrated in the strong support voiced at that meeting for new progress in this field. In the First Committee this month, the Non-Aligned Movement introduced a resolution to follow-up on that Meeting. It would declare 26 September as the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons; in addition, it contains a
decision to convene a high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament in 2018, and calls on the CD to commence negotiations on a comprehensive convention on nuclear weapons.

Another noteworthy development has taken place this year, though with very little publicity. I am referring to the establishment of a 25-member Group of Governmental Experts on a treaty to ban the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. The group is not intended to negotiate such a treaty, but to explore possibilities that exist to achieve this goal. The Conference on Disarmament, meanwhile, will continue its efforts in the coming year to commence negotiations on this issue, as indeed on other issues on its agenda.

None of these events, of course, could reasonably be expected to have produced any panaceas for all the challenges we face in achieving disarmament. That was not their intended purpose. These initiatives are instead part of a larger evolving process—a current if you will—heading in the right direction. Agendas are being built. Issues are being framed and discussed in the right contexts. The case for disarmament is being more clearly and persuasively defined, just as the horrors of nuclear weapons are becoming better understood.

We are potentially now starting a new chapter in the history of nuclear disarmament, as we move from an age that heralded nuclear weapons as the ultimate security guarantee and a status symbol, to a time when public demands for non-nuclear solutions to security challenges are receiving a higher priority and will not be suppressed.

This certainly applies to the longstanding efforts to establish a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. This has long been a major theme in meetings of the NPT review process and in First Committee deliberations. I just returned from a meeting in Glion, Switzerland focused on the implementation of the 2010 NPT mandate to convene an international conference on this issue. One thing I can say for sure, this initiative—while challenging to say the least—is here to stay. The fate of this zone will have profound implications for the NPT—for the better if it occurs, for the worse if it does not.

Let’s face it—there is plenty of evidence of growing international opposition to the very existence of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons in particular, due to the risks they pose to international peace and security. Disarmament, in short, is returning to some of its original roots. In the Charter, disarmament and the regulation of armaments are two important parts of a larger security system, yet they are not the only sources of security in the world.

Progress in these fields certainly strengthens international peace and security, but other parts of the Charter also need to find expression for security to be universal and sustainable. Disarmament would benefit greatly from greater efforts to expand compliance with the Charter’s fundamental norms against the use or threat of use of force, and requiring the peaceful settlement of disputes. It would also benefit from an expanded common commitment to social and economic development and the rule of law—all vitally important parts of the Charter.

This vision, however, is not one that holds that disarmament must await the prior achievement of every other Charter goal. There is a synergy in the pursuit of these objectives, with steps forward in one domain reinforcing progress in others. These goals are not to be
pursued in any sequential order. Given a chance to work, the Charter still has enormous potential to strengthen international peace and security, meet basic human needs, promote social equality and justice, and contribute to economic prosperity.

It is the lack of disarmament that jeopardizes this entire system, as scientists have shown how even a so-called “limited” nuclear war can have catastrophic planetary consequences. We have also learned a lot this year on exactly how close nuclear weapons came to detonating in a long series of accidents spanning several decades.

Disarmament, in short, is far from a utopian dream. It is a moral obligation, a legal imperative, and a necessity for security and human survival. Every human being should therefore perceive a self interest in advancing the goals of disarmament. Even silent future generations would expect us all to work more actively in constructing a legacy that includes a secure nuclear-weapon-free world.

So my advice today as we examine the details of the various conferences and other initiatives undertaken in the name of disarmament, is not to let our natural tendency to perform a microscopic analysis of each event, but instead to focus on broader trends: are they taking us in the right direction? And if so, what more can we do to move this process along. Here are just a few areas where progress is needed.

Disarmament and non-proliferation education is certainly one such area. It is essential in building public support for worthy policy initiatives and in broadening the political basis of support throughout civil society.

Investments in the science and technology of verification deserve to be another priority, because it is a powerful confidence-building measure enabling disarmament to proceed, as well as an effective means to challenge opponents of disarmament.

There is a crying need to develop some institutional infrastructure for handling disarmament issues, at both the international but especially the domestic levels. The lack of disarmament agencies, budgets, plans, and timetables suggest that priorities lie elsewhere.

Demands for increasing the transparency of nuclear-weapons programmes will certainly continue to grow, as it should, because transparency is a prerequisite for accountability. How can genuine progress in this field be measured in total darkness? Even the finest yardsticks are useless if their relevant objects cannot be seen.

I would also like to see groups in civil society expand the progress they have already been making in diversifying the constituency base for disarmament—we need to do more to reach out to sectors that have not traditionally been active in this field. To name only a few, these would include professional associations of doctors, lawyers, and engineers; the business community; journalists; labour unions; retired military personnel; and further expansion of the involvement of mayors and parliamentarians. This will likely also require greater support from private foundations.
Finally, new coalitions, alliances, and networks among non-nuclear-weapon states would be helpful in generating political momentum needed for new progress. I hope to see new levels of cooperation among parties to nuclear-weapon-free zones, a unique gathering of well over 100 States sharing common security concerns. I would like to see more references to “nuclear-weapon-free states” rather than simply “non-nuclear-weapon states”—the latter implies lower status, while the former suggests a liberating effect of not possessing such weapons. We will need such broad coalitions in order to achieve the full promise of the Secretary-General’s five-point nuclear disarmament proposal of 2008.

These are just a few of many areas where progress is needed and is achievable. As Dag Hammarskjöld once said, we need “steadfastness of purpose and flexibility of approach.” Remembering our goal and tailoring our actions to serve that goal is perhaps the most important job of all. I salute the organizers of this Dialogue for recognizing that pragmatism does not require the abandonment of principle.