Keynote Address
Nuclear Weapons: Threats and Solutions

By

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Welcome, all of you, to the United Nations. I wish to thank Jonathan Granoff and his colleagues at the Global Security Institute for organizing this event and, more importantly, for their persistent efforts on behalf of nuclear disarmament.

I understand that many of you here today are from the business community or work in the legal profession. It is gratifying indeed that the Young Presidents and World Presidents Organizations and the International Law Section of the American Bar Association would co-host this luncheon. With this professional background, you surely already understand the importance of international cooperation in addressing challenges faced by our Member States.

You know first hand the value of multilaterally agreed standards and norms. If you engage in international trade, you appreciate the confidence and stability that comes from the existence of international law. You benefit from these agreed norms every time you fly to another country. Every time you seek international protection for a trademark or patent. Every time you engage in an international electronic financial transaction. There are real, tangible, and long-lasting benefits from conducting international relations with a framework of agreed norms and legal standards that States freely recognize as binding. It’s called the rule of law.

Yet when it comes to discussions about nuclear weapons, I sometimes get the impression that there are people in this world who believe that such weapons are simply above the law. They are typically relegated to the domain of power rather than of law, and their continued existence, future development, and ultimate fate are often viewed as entirely under the control of the States that possess them, and none other. When it comes to these weapons, the law of power seems to have eclipsed the power of law.

There is some truth in this. There are indeed some gaps in the law. We do not, for example, have a nuclear weapons convention—a multilateral treaty abolishing or eliminating nuclear weapons. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has not yet entered into force and no negotiations are underway to conclude a fissile material treaty. There is no global treaty outlawing the use of nuclear weapons, though there is a growing debate underway right now over whether any such use would be prohibited by international humanitarian law or customary international law. Some call this the “nuclear taboo”. There is also no treaty banning intercontinental missiles or bombers. No space weapons treaty. And the list goes on.

Even today, some 17,000 of these weapons still remain, with thousands of them on high-alert status or subject to “first use” nuclear doctrines. These weapons are still deployed abroad in countries that are officially called non-nuclear-weapon States. We also have the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has a provision requiring all its parties to undertake negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament—but those negotiations have never taken place in the 43-year history of that treaty.

The reach of the law has also encountered limitations when it comes to addressing two other types of nuclear weapon threats—the dangers that such weapons will spread to additional countries, or that they will be acquired by non-state actors and used as instruments of terror. The NPT has contributed significantly in reducing the risk of proliferation, yet the treaty continues to be the target of concerns over its double standard of prescribing strict legal standards of non-proliferation with no comparable provisions dealing with nuclear disarmament. As a result, the
legitimacy of that treaty continues to be called into question at both UN and NPT conferences. We do have a nuclear terrorism convention, but it is still far from universal membership.

One would think that the over six decades of publicity about the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki—including heart-rending testimonies of the survivors—would have awakened the public consciousness of the hazards of such weapons. Yet it has only been in recent years that this awakening has started to occur on a large scale. Though late, it is most certainly welcome.

Respected groups of international physicians have adopted this approach. So has the respected International Committee of the Red Cross and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. International civil society campaigns like the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons and Global Zero support this approach as do countless other civil society initiatives underway throughout the world today. One NGO, Mayors for Peace, has rallied support from representatives of over 5,700 cities worldwide in support of nuclear disarmament.

This new emphasis on humanitarian consequences is not coming only from civil society. Just a few days ago, New Zealand circulated a joint statement from 124 States in the General Assembly’s First Committee on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. Another joint statement was circulated by Australia and 16 other States on the same subject, although this statement from NATO and nuclear umbrella States sought to “balance” security and humanitarian concerns associated with nuclear weapons and was, therefore, much less encompassing of the humanitarian approach.

Similar joint statements have earlier been made in the General Assembly and at NPT events. In 2010, a major NPT review conference adopted without objection language recognizing the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons.

In March this year, Oslo hosted an international conference on this humanitarian theme, which was attended by representatives of 128 States. This theme echoed in several UN arenas, including the General Assembly’s Open Ended Working Group and its first-ever High-Level Meeting on nuclear disarmament, held at the UN last September.

I can say without hesitation that this theme has profoundly shaped the way in which nuclear weapons are discussed today—both inside and outside of governments, and certainly in international organizations like the UN. During the darker days of the Cold War— which regrettably still cast their shadow over some current nuclear weapons policies—the very devastation caused by nuclear weapons underwrote their alleged value in protecting security interests. This was the classic logic of nuclear deterrence—“you won’t dare strike me because my counter-strike would destroy you.” Nuclear strategists used to call this the stability of “two scorpions in a bottle”, with none willing to strike because to do so would mean immediate death.

Even though we now have nine scorpions in that bottle, this kind of reasoning has not yet entirely given way to new approaches to meeting our common security needs. Nuclear weapons were completely irrelevant to the attack in New York on 9/11—they were also completely irrelevant in responding to those attacks. Such weapons did not prevent their various possessor States from losing long wars. Yet the basic doctrine of nuclear deterrence continues to be
practiced today by each State that possesses such weapons.

The threat I would now like to address today is an entirely different kind of nuclear weapons threat. As long as we are discussing such threats, let’s discuss them all.

So far I’ve been discussing threats from nuclear weapons. As grave as they are. I would now like to identify some of the threats to nuclear weapons:

- Threats to their continued existence.
- Threats to the doctrine that rationalizes their possession and threats of use.
- Threats to the special interests that benefit from the preservation of such weapons.

By shifting this line of reasoning, I think we can look upon the nuclear weapons challenge in a different light. Collectively, we are not just trying to get rid of something that is jeopardizing our collective interests and values. We are trying to build something better—a more reliable foundation for security, one that is more consistent with our basic humanity.

What is it that threatens the existence of nuclear weapons? The nuclear strategists say: other nuclear weapons, following the standard logic of deterrence. Their circular reasoning is astonishing: these weapons exist here, because they exist there—and because they exist there, they must exist here. So the end of this vicious circle can only be that each state should have its own nuclear weapons capability, justified as the ultimate guarantee of security.

This argument is not only vulnerable in logic, it actually gives rise to its own dangers. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called the doctrine of nuclear deterrence “contagious” for precisely this reason. It virtually invites further proliferation.

So if nuclear weapons themselves are not sufficient to threaten the existence of other nuclear weapons, what else would do so?

One possibility might be the global financial crisis, and its budgetary implications for all states that are seeking to maintain nuclear arsenals or to maintain options for acquiring them. The trillions of dollars that have been spent on such weapons are starting to get some deeper scrutiny in the budget process, as the various budget slices start to shrink and the social and economic opportunity costs of such massive investments become better appreciated. This has the potential, at the very least, to contribute to a shrinking of the arsenals and perhaps a reduced reliance on such weapons in defence policies. That’s at least a start.

There are of course other costs to these weapons—including the health and safety of workers at nuclear weapons facilities, and the environmental issues associated with the disposal of radiological materials and in cleaning up weapons production complexes.

Another growing concern relates to occurrence of numerous accidents involving such weapons, including some that resulted in lost nuclear weapons and non-nuclear explosions scattering nuclear materials on land and in the ocean. Maintaining these arsenals bears some resemblance to the game of roulette: we cross our fingers and hope that one day the various
“fail-safe” safety systems will not fail us. If these weapons pose such risks, with only illusory benefits, this gives rise to questions about why they exist at all.

Another threat facing nuclear weapons comes from former military personnel and former statesmen who worked closely on nuclear weapons issues. In op-eds and other commentaries, more are questioning the military value of such weapons, and the significant risks associated with continued possession. In an interview with a Japanese newspaper earlier this year, Colin Powell—the former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—was asked why he thought nuclear weapons were useless, and he responded: “Because they’re such horrible weapons. And so no sane leader would ever want to cross that line to using nuclear weapons. And, if you are not going to cross that line, then these things are basically useless.”\(^1\) Former Defence Ministers of nuclear-weapon States have also publicly supported nuclear disarmament, including Paul Quilès of France and Des Browne of the United Kingdom.

I have already identified challenges to nuclear weapons being posed by groups in civil society, but they are not alone, as new coalitions of States have arisen both in the General Assembly and NPT arenas, as I’ve illustrated above in the case of the joint statements on humanitarian consequences. Over 100 States belonging to regional nuclear-weapon-free zones are periodically meeting to share their lessons learned and to explore new avenues for eliminating such weapons. Perhaps most impressive about these coalitions are how diverse they are: they include countries from the North and South, East and West; rich and poor; large and small.

Together, they testify to a remarkable development in our time: democracy is coming to disarmament, and this has enormous potential to threaten the future of nuclear weapons. More states are taking an interest in this issue and are working together to achieve it, just as civil society is increasing its own efforts to achieve the same goal.

So today, I have given you a brief survey of the full range of nuclear weapons threats. Solutions that fall short of disarmament fail to come to terms with the monumental scale of the threats posed by these weapons. The best that such solutions can produce is a rationale for the perpetuation of such weapons at lower levels, at lower levels of alert, or with a reduced role in military policy. None of those would eliminate the risk of use.

How extraordinary it is, after over six decades, that in country after country we are approaching a stage in history when the discussion about nuclear weapons may be shifting from a focus on the threats they pose, to the subject of threats to their very existence.

In our world with so many threats, I think we have finally found one that may help humanity to save itself from one of its most dangerous inventions: nuclear weapons, and the whole rationale for keeping them. I invite all here today—especially because of your backgrounds—to join the growing worldwide community of States and groups that are seeking to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. Future generations would be grateful, and so will you.

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\(^1\) Asahi Shinbum, 11 July 2013.