CLOSING REMARKS

Opportunities and Challenges for Disarmament in South Atlantic and Antarctica

By

Ms. Virginia Gamba
Director and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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I am grateful for the honour of attending this International Seminar on geostrategic issues in the South Atlantic—grateful for two particular reasons.

First, I am attending in my capacity as member of the United Nations Secretariat—as Director of the Office for Disarmament Affairs and Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. I very much welcome this opportunity to offer a “UN perspective” on the important issues that have been the focus of this Seminar.

Second, this is a personal honour for me, because I am a citizen of Argentina and have devoted much of my career to studying geostrategic issues both in this region and in Africa. The sweeping range of the subjects addressed by earlier speakers underscores the fact that there can be no one single “expert” on all security and natural resource issues in this region. It is only through our combined engagement, thought, and study that we can deepen our insights into the nature of the challenges ahead and ways to address them productively.

I am struck by one theme we have often heard over these last three days. This relates to the broadening definition of the term, “security”. The wide range of professions represented at this Seminar symbolizes the extent that “security studies” has been emerging as a multidisciplinary field. Each year we are appreciating better the limits of purely military or diplomatic perspectives in defining security challenges and in responding to them.

The days have past when confident aphorisms by Great-Power theorists can suffice to comprehend contemporary geostrategic realities—even Henry Kissinger has ceased repeating his notorious assertion that Latin America is the “dagger pointing at the heart of Antarctica.”

Many studies of security issues in Antarctica and the South Atlantic have grasped this larger definition of security. We see this in the growing references to environmental studies and the natural sciences in addressing security issues in this region—including the study of the region’s geology, oceanography, glaciology, meteorology, whaling, resource management and conservation, and biodiversity—and many of these issues were addressed at this Seminar.

Most discussions of geostrategic issues focus on the immediate material interests of specific states. Yet as the presentations of this Seminar have made clear, this is an inadequate foundation for both analysis and for making policy prescriptions. There is a growing awareness that close cooperation among states is indispensable in addressing challenges that are truly regional in scope, with potentially global implications.

One of the subjects that most fascinates me in examining security issues in this region concerns the role of international law, rules, and norms in influencing the behaviour of states. We have, for example, a long list of international treaties dealing with wide range of issues, including—the conservation of marine living resources; maritime pollution; the regulation of mineral resource activities; various conventions on boundaries; maritime search and rescue; hazardous waste disposal; and maritime navigation, to name only a few.

In addressing traditional security issues, however, we have seen no such comparable development of the rule of law. Yes, we have the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which requires that
the continent shall be used only for peaceful purposes, thereby creating a de facto ban on the stationing of nuclear weapons and a de jure ban on testing such weapons in that region.

Meanwhile other relevant treaties of a more global scope have also had implications for this region. These include the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere, in the oceans, and in outer space. All of the states of this region are parties to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And the 1971 Seabed Treaty outlawed the placement of nuclear weapons or any weapons of mass destruction on the seabed.

Surely the greatest step forward in Latin America with respect to nuclear weapons came in 1967 with the signature of the Tlatelolco Treaty, creating the world’s first nuclear-weapon-free zone in a populated area—truly a great step forward. Yet the treaty did not end all nuclear threats in the region nor in adjacent areas. Its scope extended only to the 60th southern latitude. Some nuclear-weapon States used interpretative declarations to qualify their negative security assurances against using nuclear weapons against parties to the treaty. And there are no guarantees that oceans in this zone will truly be nuclear-weapon-free, given the capabilities of nuclear-armed submarines to transit through these areas. All of this testifies to the continuing need to pursue a global ban on all nuclear weapons.

Beyond the sphere of nuclear weapons, we have since 1948 been cooperating together in this region as members of the Organization of American States to advance our common interests in promoting democracy, human rights, security, and development. And we are parties to the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Rio Pact), which also entered into force the same year, as the Cold War was just starting to evolve. In 1999, the Member States of MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay), Bolivia and Chile jointly declared a zone of peace, free of all weapons of mass destruction—which has the distinction of being the world’s first WMD-free zone.

And last August, the Agency for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean adopted an OPANAL “Strategic Agenda” (Res. CG/554) that included a common commitment to move forward towards the negotiation of a universally legally-binding instrument aimed at banning nuclear weapons, while also affirming “general and complete disarmament” as its final objective.

This concept of general and complete disarmament encompasses simultaneously both the elimination of WMD and the limitation of conventional arms. When combined with the other fundamental norms of the UN Charter—specifically the prohibition on the threat or use of force and the obligation to resolve disputes peacefully—and the other goals of the Charter relating to social and economic development, human rights, and the rule of law—we have the over-arching normative framework or structure for maintaining international peace and security. I strongly believe that this framework is also applicable at the regional and subregional level as well, especially in the South Atlantic and Antarctica.

After hearing this Seminar’s statements, I have become all the more convinced that the treaty-based or normative framework for addressing both conventional arms control and
WMD disarmament in this region needs to be strengthened, to keep pace with the very positive technical and scientific cooperation that has been occurring outside these fields.

We have a strong foundation on which to build. There is already widespread support in this region for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and for negotiating a nuclear weapons convention or instrument. And cooperation has been growing between members of the Tlatelolco Treaty and parties to nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties in other regions. Together, this represents a political bloc or coalition with some considerable potential for shaping the global discourse on the future of nuclear weapons and the need to eliminate them.

And as this cooperation grows, so too will there be a need to work together to address a host of conventional arms issues, including the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, the limitation of arms exports, the reduction of military spending, and other measures that will have the result of substantially reducing the risk of military competition that could one day lead to a regional arms race or future armed conflicts.

The time to begin discussing the establishment of what might well be called a “South Atlantic security community” with its own set of rules and norms—consistent with the Charter—is not after future conflicts arise, but right now. This may well be the over-arching conclusion of this Second International Seminar on The South Atlantic Geostrategic Scenario, Sovereignty and Natural Resources in the Twenty-First Century.

Such a community must be based on a concept of security that is substantially broader than the boundaries of traditional approaches to military capabilities and power balances. It will have to encompass security based on mutual cooperation, and it will have to take into consideration our common environmental circumstances. Our shared “geostrategic scenario” must not be one of a power struggle for limited resources, but collaboration in pursuing the legitimate interests shared by all in this region, at the expense of none.

This is a goal that has strong support at the UN and it extends all the way to Antarctica. This support has been there for years, as illustrated by the comprehensive 200-page report to the General Assembly issued in 1984 by Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar on the “Question of Antarctica” (A/39/583), and in subsequent reports. It is also apparent in numerous resolutions adopted by the General Assembly over many decades.

In his visit to Antarctica in 2007, our current Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that “Antarctica is a natural lab that helps us understand what is happening to our world. We must save this precious earth, including all that is here. It is a natural wonder, but above all, it is our common home.” His words offer a compelling basis for cooperation and the avoidance of conflict in this greater region. Seminars like this one can help point the way to achieve these goals, and to strengthen international peace and security as a very welcome result. I congratulate the City of Rio Grande, Tierra del Fuego and its mayor Mr. Melella for this excellent initiative which surely will be repeated. Thank you.