Luncheon Address

Toward a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World: A United Nations Perspective

By

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Parliamentary Conference and PNND Annual Assembly

Climbing the Mountain:
Legislators collaborating on bilateral, plurilateral and global measures towards a secure nuclear-weapons-free world

Hosted by
Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND)

Washington, D.C.
26 February 2014
I am honoured to address this distinguished audience of parliamentarians on the challenges of achieving a world free of nuclear weapons. I wish to thank Alyn Ware and Jonathan Granoff for inviting me to speak on one of my favourite subjects. It is also a special privilege to appear at this luncheon, chaired by Senator Douglas Roche, whose leadership in nuclear disarmament has been so widely and justifiably recognized.

The subtitle for this conference highlights the wide variety of approaches for scaling the great mountain of disarmament. These include bilateral, plurilateral, and global measures, presumably along with some unilateral and regional initiatives. The active support of civil society is also essential.

While the paths before us are many, the destination is and must remain fixed. As long agreed in the world community, our common goal is not simply to limit the numbers of deployed nuclear weapons, to reduce their likelihood of use, or to limit their effects. The challenge is also far greater than just limiting the range or explosive yields of such weapons, or the number of countries that possess them. Instead, the goal is to abolish such weapons and to destroy existing stockpiles securely. On 24 October 2008, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon included this goal in his five-point nuclear disarmament proposal, which included a call to negotiate a nuclear weapons convention or a “framework of separate, mutually reinforcing instruments.”

At the United Nations, our Member States have pursued many other ways to limit nuclear weapons—including test bans, a fissile material treaty, non-proliferation initiatives, de-alerting schemes, regional nuclear-weapon-free zones, and nuclear security assurances. These so-called “partial measures” all share a linkage to nuclear disarmament, and the vast majority of Member States do not view them as ends in themselves. Indeed, it is precisely their close connection with disarmament—a universal common standard—that gives these various partial measures legitimacy in the eyes of world opinion. This legitimacy is based on an open democratic process for creating such norms, and on the fairness of the norms themselves, which exclude double standards.

I am emphasizing today the multilateral norms in this field for a reason. The process of establishing such norms, maintaining them, adapting them to changing conditions, and reaching agreement on new norms is one of the most important functions of the United Nations. This is what we were created to do. This is our “value added” to a much larger process underway to advance disarmament and other global goals.

Of course, everybody can make a contribution to disarmament. Citizens can voice their opinions and state preferences to their political representatives. Legislators can adopt resolutions, conduct investigations, set and clarify national policy priorities, make speeches, conduct debates, and appropriate funds for conducting many kinds of

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disarmament-related activities—such as commissioning of research or the provision of financial support to relevant international organizations. Non-governmental groups have a huge role to play in educating and mobilizing the public and in holding governments accountable for their actions (or inactions) in this field. Religious groups are united worldwide in support of disarmament on moral and ethical grounds.

At the UN, our Member States have many tools at their disposal for undertaking their common norm-building responsibilities. They meet each year in the UN Disarmament Commission to seek a consensus on new guidelines, standards, or principles relating to a specific type of weaponry, typically nuclear weapons and conventional arms. And each year, they gather in the General Assembly’s First Committee to consider resolutions on disarmament, as well as on many non-proliferation and arms regulation issues. While the products of both these arenas—the guidelines and resolutions—are not legally binding, they do carry political weight and serve as points of reference to Member States in the conduct of their diplomatic relations. Last September, by holding a High-Level meeting on nuclear disarmament, Member States emphasized the importance of seeking a safer world for all and achieving peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons.

Another key institution in the “UN disarmament machinery” is the 65-member Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, which has the mandate to undertake multilateral negotiations in this field. It seeks agreement on legally binding multilateral treaties with universal membership as their goal. Including its earlier incarnations, the CD is where the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and others were negotiated. New initiatives to revitalize the work of the CD and the disarmament machinery include the open-ended working group on advancing multilateral disarmament negotiations, which has met last year in Geneva with the important contribution of international organizations and civil society.

Yet as is often the case when machinery is not used—or is misused—serious breakdowns have occurred in each of these arenas—UN Disarmament Commission, the First Committee or the CD—preventing the advancement of disarmament goals, especially nuclear disarmament.

Despite widespread agreement on this goal, there is still deep dissatisfaction among many countries and in civil society over the slow pace of progress. Some question the intention of nuclear-weapon states to follow through on their disarmament commitments. Some point to the well-funded, long-term programmes to modernize existing nuclear arsenals and their delivery systems. Still others point to the lack of infrastructures for disarmament—and they ask: where are the disarmament agencies, the laws and regulations, the budgets, and the plans for achieving this goal?
The longer this malaise continues, the greater will be the risk that the global nuclear non-proliferation regime will be placed in jeopardy, as more and more countries become tempted to reassess their commitment to the very notion of non-proliferation. Yet, two decades ago, several new independent States have given up their nuclear weapons and joined the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon States. If these weapons really do have all the capabilities that their possessors claim they have—if they are the ultimate insurance policy, essential for national defence, a source of prestige, and are militarily effective—then on what grounds can other countries be prevented from defending themselves by similar means? This helps to explain why the excessive—or even worse—exclusive reliance on non-proliferation as the preferred approach to address nuclear weapons threats will prove to be unsustainable. Ironically, it will inspire the very proliferation such a policy was intended to prevent.

Now, so far today I have been discussing various “UN perspectives” on achieving global nuclear disarmament. Though I have made it clear that the UN is by no means the only institution that works in this field, I do believe that its role in the establishment and maintenance of multilateral norms is truly unique and indispensable.

Yet I also believe that your role as parliamentarians is indispensable. Obviously the United Nations and national parliaments are entirely different political institutions and the differences are easy to identify. You are voted into office and are beholden to serve the interests of your constituents. You strengthen your influence by organizing in political parties. You can enact laws and even change governments.

In some ways, however, we may have a lot more in common than many might think. Just as members of parliament must represent the views and interests of their local constituents, so too are they assumed to be responsible for making decisions in the interest of their country overall. If parliamentarians were required to vote exclusively to serve the interests of their local constituents, there would be no need for legislators, and parliaments would be replaced by public opinion polling centres. Instead, they must also consider the wider interests of their entire country.

A similar process occurs at the UN. Representatives come here to advance their national interests, but they often find themselves having to consider the global interest—embodied in the great norms found in the UN Charter. Alleviating world poverty, protecting the environment, educating the illiterate, feeding the hungry, eliminating slavery, and promoting gender equality—these are all challenges by no means limited to the interests of a single country. They extend to the entire global community of countries—indeed, to all humanity. These are often called “global public goods” and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called nuclear disarmament a “global public good of the highest order.” So while the differences between our institutions are clear, parliamentarians and UN diplomats share a common responsibility to weigh both parochial local interests and the interests of larger communities.
I believe that this offers a fair explanation for why all of you are here today and why you belong to an organization called “Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament”. You have come to support such goals because you understand how the collective interest of your citizens, and even more broadly the collective interests of all countries, would be well served by progress in eliminating these horrific weapons of mass destruction. You have recognized the consistency of nuclear disarmament with both the ideals and self-interests of your constituents and your fellow citizens not only in your respective countries but also in the great family of humanity.

So if what I have said is true, is there really much difference between “UN perspectives” on nuclear disarmament and your own as parliamentarians? I suspect not. The challenge is to expand the community of parliamentary supporters of disarmament, by helping your colleagues understand that, in this field as in many others, there is no choice to be made between the national interest and the global interest. When international peace and security is strengthened through the elimination of a class of weaponry that could destroy all humanity, everybody benefits. And elimination is the most reliable means to prevent use.

These benefits are not limited to the freedom from the threat of nuclear attack. Nuclear disarmament would open up possibilities for a re-allocation of resources to address pressing social and economic needs. The Washington-based Brookings Institution once issued a report called “Atomic Audit” which concluded that the total costs of nuclear weapons in one country alone—the United States—was over $5.8 trillion. That number was so large that the authors offered this analogy: “If $1 was counted off every second, it would take almost . . . 184,579 years to tally the actual and anticipated costs of nuclear weapons.”

For those of you who work in the budget process, keep in mind that this staggering amount covers expenditures by only one country . . . and that was 16 years ago.

A similar point could be made about global military expenditure, which last year was over $1.7 trillion. Here’s a translation of that figure: the UN’s current regular budget is about $2.7 billion per year—at that rate it would take well over 600 years of UN budgets to equal just one year of global military spending. After all that spending, one might well wonder if our planet—let alone the UN—will make it to the year 2614.

Now I know it does not require much stretching of your imaginations as parliamentarians to consider the possible alternative uses of even a fraction of such funds. Thus a strong case could be made that global nuclear disarmament would not only make us all safer, but potentially free resources to enable a higher quality of life.

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2 http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/archive/nucweapons/box1.
Despite its many benefits, nuclear disarmament will continue to face many obstacles. Yet I remain cautiously optimistic that we will not just witness—but contribute to—progress in this field in the years ahead. If any of you ever has the opportunity to visit the United Nations, or to participate as a member of your national delegation at a major UN disarmament meeting, I would strongly encourage you to do so. You would be more than welcome, because nuclear disarmament is truly an issue where the UN perspective . . . is your perspective.