Toward a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World: 
The Contribution of Parliaments

By

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Seminar

Security Without Nuclear Weapons
Role of the Czech Republic and Czech Legislators
in the International Disarmament Processes

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I wish at the outset to express my deep appreciation to Ms. Alena Gajdůšková, the Vice President of this Senate, for having invited me to speak today. I also wish to thank the co-sponsors of this seminar, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament and the Prague Vision Institute for Sustainable Security.

My gratitude, of course, is not limited simply to my invitation to speak. I sincerely want to express my respects and even admiration for the interest that members of the Czech Parliament have shown in achieving global nuclear disarmament. Your interest in this subject, combined with the concerns repeatedly voiced by your colleagues in the Inter-Parliamentary Union, reflect a conviction deeply held among the people throughout the world that enough is enough. They understand that the time has come to stop just talking about nuclear disarmament. The time has come for action. The time has come for results.

It is somewhat hard to believe that five years have passed since President Obama made his historic speech in this city calling for the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. As time has passed, however, his message has become widely interpreted to meaning something quite different. Some appear to believe that his real message was to underscore that peace and security were prerequisites for the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons—a reversal of the priorities in his original speech.

The difficulties in that re-interpretation are clear. If we demand as prerequisites for disarmament the resolution of all regional disputes, the final defeat of all terrorism, and an end to war or the possibility of armed conflict, we would only be creating a recipe for the indefinite retention of nuclear arsenals. This is a little like demanding the end of greed as a precondition for preventing bank robberies.

I believe that President Obama was right in the first place. A world without nuclear weapons would certainly be a more secure and peaceful world than what we are facing today. This alone makes it a worthy goal to pursue, and this is what explains the interest that your constituents have shown in supporting such a cause.

One of the highest hurdles to overcome in promoting global nuclear disarmament has been the allegation that it is a utopian goal, one that is completely impractical and unlikely ever to be achieved. Though I have encountered this view throughout my professional career, I remain convinced that it is based on a serious misunderstanding both of the genuine security benefits that disarmament has to offer, and the alleged security benefits of the status quo.

Sceptics of disarmament, first of all, like to imply that abandoning nuclear weapons is a discrete act, one undertaken as a form of philanthropy in the hope for a better world. There are of course moral and legal reasons to get rid of these weapons. Yet the real benefit to be derived from nuclear disarmament is enhanced security.

To explain this, I will need to draw upon a little history. After the Second World War, the architects of the UN Charter recognized the need for a new international security system to replace the military and geopolitical rivalries that led to that tragic war. They recognized that the Charter must set forth some fundamental norms to guide the behaviour of Member States—and foremost amongst these were the duty to resolve disputes peacefully and the prohibition on the threat or use of force. Other goals in the Charter related to the advancement of social and economic development, the protection of human rights, and the strengthening of the rule of law. Disarmament and the “regulation of armaments” were also included in this formula, which the General Assembly later clarified referred to the
elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and the limitation and
regulation of conventional arms. My point here is that all of these form a coherent whole:
the various components of this system reinforce each other. The real challenge here is
therefore not to reinvent a new system for maintaining international peace and security, but to
implement the one wisely set forth in the Charter.

Far from being a final act only to be achieved after an earthly Nirvana has been
achieved, disarmament has its own significant security contributions to make. It is
profoundly important as a confidence-building measure, mainly because of the controls,
duties, and responsibilities that come with it. Over many decades at the United Nations and
in other multilateral treaty arenas, five standards have evolved to achieve this goal.

Disarmament, for example, is not undertaken on the basis of a blind act of faith.
Commitments must be, first of all, verified, as compliance is never simply taken for granted.
Second, disarmament undertakings must be irreversible, for there could hardly be much
confidence built upon commitments that could change overnight. Third, disarmament
requires transparency: regime participants must disclose relevant data on their warheads,
delivery systems, fissile material, and other relevant resources and technologies. Fourth,
disarmament commitments must be universal, because by definition there cannot truly be a
“world” without nuclear weapons if certain States are allowed to possess them. Fifth, it is
inconceivable that commitments of this nature would be registered in anything other than a
legally binding treaty or a framework of related instruments, as has been proposed by
Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in his five-point disarmament proposal of 2008.

The mere elimination of weapons of mass destruction, however, was never intended
to suffice in eliminating all competition and conflict between States. In various regions
around the world, even the disappearance of such weapons would leave behind imbalances in
conventional forces that could well lead to arms races and wars.

The UN Charter and succeeding General Assembly resolutions fully anticipated this
risk, and here is where the regulation of conventional armaments comes into play. As nuclear
weapons and other weapons of mass destruction are prohibited and eliminated, these must be
accompanied by parallel efforts to limit conventional arms through such measures as
enhancing transparency on the production, stockpiling, and transfers of arms, establishing
standards to govern arms exports, adopting commitments to reduce military spending, and
ensuring that research and development are fully consistent with international humanitarian
law.

Together, the elimination of weapons of mass destruction combined with the
regulation of conventional arms constitute what the international community has called
“general and complete disarmament under effective international control”—a goal found in
no less than a dozen multilateral treaties.

Now one could well ask at this point, why is any of this relevant to national
legislatures? Is this not exclusively a matter for the Executive, foreign and defence ministries
of each State, especially those States with the largest arsenals?

The answers are no to both questions. First, all States Parties to the Nuclear Non-
Proliferation Treaty have an obligation to undertake negotiations in good faith on nuclear
disarmament, a duty that the International Court of Justice has ruled extends to all countries.
The Court also ruled that these States have a responsibility to bring such negotiations to a
conclusion. So yes indeed, the obligation to pursue global nuclear disarmament is by no means limited just to the big powers.

My second point here is that nuclear weapons threats are a legitimate concern of all the people, due to the horrific humanitarian consequences from the use of such weapons—even one of them—as we saw in the cases of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because of the inherently indiscriminate effects of such weapons, and the cross-border nature of those effects, every human being on this planet has a stake in preventing another use of such weapons. It is often said that political will is needed to achieve nuclear disarmament—ultimately this political will originates with the people.

Here is where the legislatures play such an important role. They serve as an arena for representing the interests and priorities of their constituents. They provide a forum for debating avenues for pursuing disarmament and for recognizing and meeting security challenges of a world in which disarmament has not been achieved. They ratify treaties in this field and appropriate funds to implement them. They oversee the implementation of State policies and work to ensure accountability for efficient and effective progress in achieving agreed goals. These are all vitally important functions and they contribute significantly in strengthening the political will of countries to pursue disarmament goals.

Personally, I find the growth of parliamentary interest in disarmament issues one of the most promising developments of our time. It is enormously encouraging that busy parliamentarians—who are overwhelmed with daily demands from their constituents for countless other priorities—are willing to invest some time and energy to affirm the importance of global nuclear disarmament. This suggests the surprising extent that this global issue has taken root at the local level in many countries throughout the world. People are increasingly understanding how the solution of this global challenge can produce real benefits for all citizens at home.

For all these reasons, I salute the Parliament of the Czech Republic for the interest you have shown in addressing this issue. I welcome the efforts you have made to work with your parliamentary colleagues elsewhere in the European Union and in the Inter-Parliamentary Union to advance this cause. And I wish you the very best in all your future work in this field. It is only through sustained efforts at the local, national, and international levels, that we will be able to achieve the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. This is the historic message from Prague. Let us not rest until it is achieved.

As long as we do not rest, hope for a safer and more secure world will persist. And as long as hope persists, people everywhere will continue to pursue global nuclear disarmament. The alternative risks associated with the status quo are simply unacceptable—I am referring here to the endlessly rising military expenditures, the lost opportunities for social and economic development, the dangers associated with the contagious doctrine of nuclear deterrence, the risks of catastrophic accidents or accidental nuclear wars, and the known limitations of export controls and sanctions as ways to end nuclear-weapon threats.

Hope for a better future rests on the fundamental unsustainability of the status quo when it comes to nuclear weapons. The doctrine of nuclear deterrence will one day either be abandoned or it will proliferate. The division of the world into two camps of nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed States will also prove harder to sustain in time. Resistance to long-term, well-funded nuclear weapon modernization programmes will grow. The day will yet come when the nuclear-weapon States will finally create disarmament agencies—backed by
domestic laws, regulations, budgets, and timetables—for implementing their international disarmament commitments. These are my hopes and I suspect they are yours as well.

Hope for a better world for future generations is undoubtedly a powerful motivator for action, and no one understood this better than one of your sons, Vaclaw Havel, whose words I will now use to close my remarks today:

I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure that everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is the feeling that life and work have a meaning. You either have it or you don’t, regardless of the state of the world that surrounds you. Life without hope is an empty, boring, and useless life. I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big as life itself.1

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