The United Nations and Nuclear Disarmament: The Road Travelled, The Journey Ahead

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Advancing UN Approaches to Nuclear Disarmament

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I would like to begin by thanking Alyn Ware for inviting me to speak at this NPT side event on UN approaches to nuclear disarmament, and also by congratulating the co-hosts of this event—Prague Vision and the Basel Peace Office—for the fine work they are doing to promote the achievement of a world free of nuclear weapons.

As many here today know, nuclear disarmament is one of the earliest goals of the United Nations. While the terms “disarmament” and “regulation of armaments” were included in the UN Charter, it was only after the atomic bombings in Japan when the world community recognized that it would have to clarify what these terms actually meant.

The General Assembly responded on 24 January 1946 by adopting its first resolution, which called for the elimination of nuclear weapons and all other weapons “adaptable to mass destruction”. Later that year the General Assembly clarified that “regulation of armaments” referred to conventional arms.

These twin goals—the elimination of WMD and the regulation of conventional arms—are not only among the first goals of the UN, they continue to remain high priorities among UN Member States. To a considerable extent, these issues have become part of the organizational identity of the United Nations—they help to define where we stand and what we are seeking to achieve.

As important as disarmament and the regulation of armaments are, however, they are obviously not this institution’s only goals in the field of international peace and security. They are vital components of a wider cooperative security system based on the fundamental norms, duties and responsibilities of the UN Charter. These include the obligation to resolve disputes peacefully and the prohibition of the threat and use of force. They include social and economic development. They extend to the promotion of human rights and the rule of law. Together, these constitute what might be called the UN Charter system.

Though I do not want to exaggerate the independent contributions of disarmament and arms control in this wider framework of norms relative to these other goals, neither do I wish to minimize their contributions in strengthening international peace and security. To a large extent, the success or failure of disarmament will affect literally everything else the UN does.

It is widely recognized, for example, that nuclear disarmament offers the most reliable means to ensure against any future use of a nuclear weapon. The world is also more aware that even a so-called “small” nuclear war—contained to a specific region—could produce effects on the global climate leading to what scientists have called a “nuclear famine” killing over a billion people. Frankly, the solemn goals of the Charter system would be difficult if not impossible to sustain in a world that suffered from such a nuclear tragedy. The stakes are that high.

Over the years, two contrasting approaches have been taken at the UN to achieve nuclear disarmament. Early efforts focused on pursuing both nuclear disarmament and the regulation of armaments—this led to the establishment of the UN Disarmament Commission in 1952. Over the next decade, international diplomacy sought to achieve the negotiation of a single comprehensive treaty that would accomplish both objectives. In 1959, “general and complete...
disarmament under effective international control” (GCD) was added to the agenda of the General Assembly, where it has been ever since, having been made the UN’s “ultimate objective” at the General Assembly’s first Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. We sometimes forget that GCD is also a goal mentioned in a dozen multilateral treaties, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions.

Those amongst us who might think that GCD was a utopian goal ought to read the McCloy-Zorin Joint Statement agreed by the United States and the Soviet Union in September 1961, and also read President Kennedy’s statement to the General Assembly on 25 September of that year. There was, in short, some common ground on the comprehensive approach.

Yet the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and further deterioration of relations between the existing superpowers led the world community to set aside—but not to abandon—the comprehensive approach for what were called “partial measures”. These were widely viewed as stepping stones leading to the agreed ultimate goal of GCD: consisting, once again, of zero nuclear weapons and reduced conventional arms.

Now, there are two points I would like to make today concerning these so-called partial measures as they have been pursued at the UN. First, by their numbers and variety, they prove conclusively that progress in disarmament and arms control is possible even when the big powers were locked in that great rivalry known as the Cold War. Even despite US/Soviet tension, the world was still able to agree to the NPT, the CWC, the BWC, the Partial Test Ban Treaty, the Seabed Treaty, the Outer Space Treaty, and the establishment of two regional nuclear-weapon-free zones in that era. Through bilateral and unilateral reductions, the world’s estimated arsenal of nuclear weapons declined from over 70,000 in the 1980s to less than 20,000 today.

This progress is worth remembering when we hear commentators today asserting that the current tensions between the Russian Federation and United States have rendered disarmament an impractical if not naively utopian goal. These commentators haven’t read their history books.

But the other point I would like to make about partial measures is that they alone will not likely take us to a world free of nuclear weapons. As they have been pursued in the past, partial measures have more closely resembled the Charter goal of “regulation of armaments” than disarmament. The reductions we have seen in nuclear stockpiles have been based on unilateral, unverified declarations. To this day, not one nuclear weapon has been physically destroyed pursuant to a treaty, bilateral or multilateral. Most of the world still lives in countries that either have nuclear weapons or rely on a proverbial nuclear umbrella. Meanwhile, multi-decade well-funded nuclear-weapon modernization programmes are well underway, yet there are no national plans for fulfilling nuclear disarmament commitments—no disarmament agencies, budgets, legislation, regulations, or planning deadlines.

Because of this state of affairs, I believe that partial measures alone will at best take us to a world with fewer nuclear weapons, as the global nuclear weapon stockpile continues to decline gradually, over many decades, without ever achieving disarmament—much as the curved line of an asymptote slopes downward but never quite reaches zero. At worst, new frustrations will inspire despair and self-help measures, as more and more States seek such weapons.
There is, of course, another scenario, one that we may well be witnessing today. Under this alternative view, persisting doubts about partial measures or the so-called step-by-step process will inspire ad hoc initiatives by groups of countries, working in partnership with groups in civil society. At the heart of these initiatives is the proposition that a group of countries can establish, by themselves, a global norm against nuclear weapons. If this is true, then logically there is no apparent need to pursue nuclear disarmament at the United Nations.

There are, of course, many versions of this “ban the bomb” campaign and not all of them subscribe to the view that the UN has become irrelevant due to its inability to produce concrete results in nuclear disarmament. There is absolutely no reason why a campaign to ban the bomb cannot coexist with a more inclusive, universal approaches pursued at the United Nations. These can be mutually reinforcing processes, rather than competitive policy alternatives.

It is of course impossible to deny that Member States and NGOs are frustrated over the stalemates in the UN disarmament machinery. The failure of the UN Disarmament Commission to reach a consensus on guidelines or substantive recommendations, the deep divisions in the General Assembly’s First Committee on nuclear resolutions, and the inability of the Conference on Disarmament to negotiate multilateral disarmament treaties—these are all cases in point.

Yet is this machinery responsible for the lack of progress, or does the root of the problem lie elsewhere, in the conflicting priorities and policies of our Member States? Just as one shouldn’t blame a thermometer when the weather gets hot, so too should one not blame the UN when deep disagreements persist among its Member States prevent it from operating effectively.

These ongoing stalemates, however, are not the last word on the subject—far from it. Many of the same qualities that are now in short supply in the UN disarmament machinery—mutual trust, mutual respect, mutual accommodation, confidence, compromise, and conciliation—are present outside the organization among groups of States that share common ideals and self-interests.

It is conceivable we are witnessing a new phase of the development of international relations in which inter-State cooperation in addressing common global challenges—including in the realm of international peace and security—will become habit forming, as cooperation to serve mutual interests in one field can develop, which can create learning opportunities leading to cooperation in additional areas, including disarmament.

The UN in many ways reflects current conditions of international relations—and when the States are working together for common ends, great progress is possible. Yet in times when the world appears to be moving more toward the law of the jungle—in which armed self-help is the only meaningful defence—such circumstances would hinder disarmament initiatives whether they are pursued inside or outside the UN.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the UN in disarmament has been to promote the evolution of five basic norms that define what constitutes a quality disarmament agreement. These have been developed in General Assembly resolutions, special sessions, and in various
multilateral treaties. They are the following: verification; transparency; irreversibility; universality; and commitments that are legally binding.

The great strength of a group of countries pursuing a ban-the-bomb treaty outside the UN is that it would constitute a partial measure to further de-legitimize nuclear weapons, at least with respect to those who become parties to such a treaty. The great weakness of such an approach is its failure to satisfy the agreed disarmament standards for universal membership, verification, transparency, and irreversibility.

I therefore believe the goal of achieving a truly global ban on nuclear weapons must be pursued at the world’s common meeting place, the United Nations, even when the times are rough. To be fully global, it must involve the participation of all States, not just some of them. The effort must be inspired both by ideals and self-interest: the weapons must be widely if not universally viewed as intrinsically immoral, and their possession must not be viewed as of great value as a military or diplomatic weapon, or a basis of status or prestige. As long as the contagious doctrine of nuclear deterrence persists, we will not ever get to a nuclear-weapon-free world, regardless of the negotiating venue. The challenge must not simply be to “reduce the role of” nuclear weapons in security policies but to eliminate the weapons sustained by those policies.

I do not believe there is any short-cut to achieve nuclear disarmament without engaging the States that possess such weapons. And the most important form of engagement will probably be domestic rather than diplomatic. It is crucial that the citizens in States with nuclear weapons increasingly perceive such weapons as liabilities rather than assets. They must be widely viewed as dangerous to manage, hazardous to store and transport, illegal and immoral to use, useless in meeting security challenges (especially terrorism), and a waste of scarce resources. Nuclear disarmament must be viewed by these citizens as a means to enhance security, to conserve resources better used for social and economic development, and to serve the common good.

Even without this fundamental transformation of perspective, however, I still think further incremental progress is possible in nuclear disarmament, including at the United Nations. There are more global norms to create, more universality is needed, and more efforts to monitor and ensure compliance. The greatest breakthroughs, however, will require a significant shift in public attitudes about the very existence nuclear weapons. With dedicated efforts by civil society and strong diplomatic support from the international community, I do believe this is possible. It is what is most needed to enable us to achieve the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.