“United Nations Initiatives for Nuclear Abolition”

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At the outset I would like to express my gratitude to Unfold Zero for inviting me to speak today and to the esteemed non-governmental organizations that have established this worthwhile initiative which is further testament to your on-going commitment to nuclear disarmament advocacy and to achieving our shared goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

The United Nations has been inextricably entwined with the cause of disarmament since its creation. From 1945 onwards, the United Nations has remained committed to its mission to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war – a mission that cannot be accomplished without the complementary process of disarmament”.

The UN Charter references disarmament twice – in Articles 11 and 47 pertaining to the functions of the General Assembly and Security Council, respectively.

Indeed, the General Assembly’s first resolution, adopted on January 24, 1946, identified the goal of the ‘elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and all other weapons adaptable to mass destruction.’

In 1955, when the UN was barely celebrating its tenth birthday, -Dag Hammarskjöld, the then Secretary General, was already referring to nuclear disarmament as a ‘hardy perennial’ of the United Nations.

So since its inception the United Nations was both tasked with actively pursuing the abolition of weapons of mass destruction, with an emphasis on the elimination of nuclear weapons. This priority accorded to nuclear disarmament was underscored by the first UN Special Session on Disarmament in 1978.

However, in my opinion, the United Nations also takes a leading role in the active pursuit of a world free of nuclear weapons based on its role as a developer of international norms.

Sometimes the norms established through the United Nations are legally-binding, sometimes they are political commitments, but as the only near-universal intergovernmental body tasked with the maintenance of ensuring peace and security, the normative process of the United Nations, established and maintained by its Member States, always carries authority.

In the field of nuclear disarmament the adoption, maintenance and implementation of norms is carried out by the various components of the so-called ‘disarmament machinery’.

You are all familiar with these components: the United Nations Disarmament Commission, a deliberative body that considers and makes recommendations on matters of disarmament; the General Assembly’s First Committee, which meets for a month every October to debate some fifty non-binding resolutions on disarmament, peace and security; and the Conference on Disarmament – the sole multilateral disarmament negotiating body.

Over the course of decades this ‘machinery’ was home to some remarkable initiatives and processes that have coalesced into historic results – the Biological Weapons and Toxins Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Seabed Treaty, the Antarctic Treaty and the Outer Space Treaty, to name just a few.
It is therefore with much disappointing to those of us engaged in the pursuit of a safer and more secure world to have to watch this once active machinery grind to a halt as a result of what can only be described as an absence of political will.

As we all know, the Disarmament Commission has been deadlocked since 1999 and the Conference on Disarmament has spent over a decade bickering even over the adoption of a programme of work.

Consequently, it is natural that States would begin to question whether the existing disarmament machinery was appropriate for the current international climate, if it should be revamped or even replaced.

And to some extent, I believe they may have a point. After all, the disarmament machinery was created during the bipolarity of the Cold War – a fact still reflected in the regional groupings of the Conference on Disarmament – and may not be a complete fit for a multipolar era.

Having said that, I think the following question also needs to be answered: Would any replacement body be able to overcome the existing deficit in political will? Would not any successor also need to be based on consensus? Would new machinery face the same challenge of trying to bridge an ever-growing gap between the nuclear haves and the nuclear have-nots?

Because, to my mind, this is the single biggest problem facing the future disarmament initiatives and proposals at the United Nations – how to reconcile the increasing gap in perception over what should constitute the pace of nuclear disarmament.

On the one hand are the nuclear-weapon States and their allies, taking a long-term view, based on when ‘conditions are right’. And on the other hand are the vast majority of States who demand action now, not at some undefined point in the future.

This debate is playing out around us as the ninth Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons tries to navigate its way to a consensus outcome.

But all is not lost. Quite the opposite.

There are two emerging disarmament initiatives taking place across the United Nations machinery that give cause for optimism.

The first is that, largely due to frustration at the slow and insufficient measures taken by nuclear-weapon States to articulate a way forward on disarmament, non-nuclear weapon States are beginning to collectively assume greater responsibility in taking forward nuclear disarmament proposals. This has been reflected in the High Level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament and the Open-Ended Working Group Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations.

The final report of the Working Group specifically noted “that achieving a world without nuclear weapons was a shared responsibility of all States” and that “non-nuclear-weapon States had a role in promoting global nuclear disarmament”.
This is, of course, consistent with Article VI of the NPT which states that each of the Treaty’s parties has a responsibility to pursue negotiations on multilateral disarmament.

The upshot of this new trend is that those without nuclear weapons are increasingly becoming active agents for the changes they wish to see in the world. This can only be a good thing.

The second trend that gives me hope is the movement to place humanitarian considerations at the forefront of all nuclear disarmament negotiations.

Much has been said about this movement in recent months and, especially over the last three weeks. However, what cannot be overlooked or underestimated is that this is an innovative approach that seeks to educate the global populations about the real and horrific dangers posed by nuclear weapons and to ground a response to those dangers in international law.

During the NPT Review Conference’s plenary, 159 NPT States parties supported the humanitarian initiative statement. So far 80 States have signed onto Austria’s pledge to use the humanitarian imperative to fill the legal gap in the abolition of nuclear weapons.

The humanitarian approach clearly demonstrates that complex problems can incite innovative approaches. The United Nations and its disarmament machinery remain the primary vehicle for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament proposals and initiatives.

No matter the political conditions or the institutional roadblocks, the United Nations as a whole and, especially, the Office for Disarmament Affairs, are committed to building on our proud history of support for nuclear disarmament and to pursuing a world free of nuclear weapons.

Thank you.