Disarmament and international security

By

Sergio Duarte
High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations

Contribution to “An Introduction to International Relations”
Chapter 12 ‘Arms Control’
"Disarmament and International Security,"
in Richard Devetak (with Anthony Burke and Jim George)
An Introduction to International Relations
Click here to order
On 5 April 2009, US President Barack Obama addressed a large crowd in Prague and declared: ‘I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.’ Six months later, the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that he had won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Its news release explained: ‘The Committee has attached special importance to Obama’s vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.’

Notice that President Obama did not say that he was seeking to establish international peace and security so that nuclear disarmament might occur. He was instead making the point that there were concrete security benefits to be obtained from the achievement of disarmament. This difference is significant, because progress in nuclear disarmament has long been frustrated by various conditions that have been prescribed by national leaders or arms control experts from states that possess such weapons or that belong to nuclear alliances.

I have worked on disarmament for almost half a century and must say that Alva Myrdal got it right in 1976 when she wrote The game of disarmament, which described how nuclear disarmament has been postponed indefinitely through this very old game of linkage politics. This result has followed from an insistence on various preconditions that must be achieved to make disarmament possible. Some commentators say: we must first achieve world peace. Others say: we must first solve the problem of war. Indeed, an entire cascade of such arguments is easy to observe: we must first eliminate all proliferation risks from all types of weapons of mass destruction; we must first reduce to zero all risks of terrorism involving such weapons; we must first settle all regional disputes; and we must first solve even the wider problem of armed conflict itself. And the conditions go on and on, ad infinitum.

Not surprisingly, in light of this game, more than 20 000 nuclear weapons still reportedly exist, fully forty years after the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) committed its parties to ‘negotiations in good faith’ on nuclear disarmament. Such negotiations have not occurred, and not one nuclear warhead has been physically destroyed as a result of a treaty commitment. So the weapons persist, along with the endlessly proliferating preconditions for disarmament.

Some of these conditions are identified more clearly than others. On 31 January 1992, at its first summit meeting ever, the UN Security Council reaffirmed ‘the crucial contribution which progress in these areas [disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation] can make to the maintenance of international peace and security’. Yet on 24 September 2009, the Security Council held its first summit meeting specifically on disarmament issues and adopted Resolution 1887; its preamble stated that the Council was ‘resolving to seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons’. In short, the 1992 statement recognised that security was a beneficiary of disarmament, not a precondition for it to occur, as suggested in the 2009 resolution.
For its part, the General Assembly has long emphasised the contributions of nuclear disarmament to international peace and security. The preamble to the Final Document of the General Assembly’s first Special Session on disarmament stated in 1978 that the General Assembly was ‘convinced that disarmament and arms limitation, particularly in the nuclear field, are essential for the prevention of the danger of nuclear war and the strengthening of international peace and security and for the economic and social advancement of all peoples’.

On 26 October 2010, the First Committee adopted a resolution on ‘united action towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons’, with its preamble ‘recalling the need for all States to take further practical steps and effective measures towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons, with a view to achieving a peaceful and secure world free of nuclear weapons, and in this regard confirming the determination of Member States to take united action’. This was approved by an overwhelming majority, with the DPRK (North Korea) as the only dissenting vote.

The case for nuclear disarmament relates largely to its benefits in preventing the use of such weapons. This was emphasised in the consensus Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference, which stated that the Conference ‘reaffirms that the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons’.

The alternative ways of ‘preventing use’ – such as by nuclear deterrence, the balance of power, threats of preemption or first-use, missile defence, and other such measures – have long been viewed with great scepticism in the world community, especially at the UN, because of the risks associated with each approach and the lack of any guarantees of their effectiveness. Accidents, miscalculations and wilful use remain real threats with each of these alternatives – and the mere absence of a nuclear war does not prove that they have worked.

Instead, the world is not only united on the basic goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, but has also agreed on certain multilateral criteria that must be satisfied in achieving it. These include: transparency of warheads, fissile material and delivery systems records; the verification and irreversibility of disarmament commitments; the binding nature of those commitments; and the need for universal adherence. These are not conditions, but standards to use in identifying genuine progress in achieving disarmament.

Thus, the world has come to support nuclear disarmament not as a mere hope or dream. By satisfying these rigorous standards, disarmament has enormous contributions to make in strengthening international peace and security. It has received this support not simply because it is morally correct, but also because it is more effective in eliminating nuclear-weapon risks than any other option. In short, it is the right thing to do, and it works.