WELCOMING REMARKS

By

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Roundtable on Building the Framework
for a Nuclear Weapons-Free World: Laying Out the Map
Hosted by Middle Powers Initiative

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I am very grateful indeed for this opportunity to speak at the opening of this Roundtable on the timely and important subject of building a framework for achieving a nuclear-weapons-free world.

I wish at the outset to express my deep appreciation to Senator Douglas Roche—not just for his role in organizing this event, but for his long and distinguished career of promoting multilateral cooperation in disarmament.

He has been an inspiration to all who have worked with him, and he is continuing to inspire an entire new generation of support for this great cause, both within and outside of governments.

I must say that I am attracted to two particular aspects of this framework proposal by the Middle Power Initiative.

First, I welcome its focus on the practical—on what is achievable, involving specific steps not just to honour disarmament with words, but to fulfil it through concrete deeds. It is often said that “actions speak louder than words” and nowhere is this more true than with respect to nuclear disarmament.

Second, I understand that the most critical decisions must be made by States, in particular the nuclear-weapon States, in the achievement of nuclear disarmament. Yet it is also true that States do not exist in a vacuum. They are responsible for serving the interests of their people, and it
is to their citizens that they ultimately must be accountable. This MPI “framework” initiative recognizes the vital importance of working with civil society in a collective effort to translate the long-espoused vision of nuclear disarmament into realities on the ground.

Past actions by civil society had a profound influence in concluding the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, as well as in the achievement of the Mine Ban Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions. It is certainly true that the goal of achieving a prohibition on nuclear weapons will depend critically upon the understanding and persistent support of civil society.

Fortunately, efforts at the United Nations and in other multilateral arenas like the NPT review process have already established a robust outline for the roadmap ahead.

There is, for example, a longstanding consensus in the world community that “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” is our common ultimate objective, with nuclear disarmament having the highest priority. This means the simultaneous—not sequential—pursuit of the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, and the limitation or regulation of conventional armaments. One must never be viewed as a precondition for the other—the goals must be pursued together because they are mutually reinforcing.

There is also widespread agreement on qualities that should be embodied in disarmament agreements, especially concerning nuclear weapons. As expressed in General Assembly resolutions and consensus Final Documents of past NPT Review Conferences, these include the high standards of—verification, irreversibility, transparency, universality, and bindingness in law.

These were the qualities that the Secretary-General highlighted in his own five-point nuclear disarmament proposal of 24 October 2008. That particular roadmap featured a juncture the world is approaching as it considers whether to pursue a nuclear weapons convention backed by a strong system of verification, or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments with the same goal. There is no acceptable option here of parking indefinitely or shifting into reverse.

In essence, the world’s great challenge in achieving nuclear disarmament is to explore ways to make better use of the roadmaps it has already painstakingly composed. We need navigation aids, yardsticks, and improved compasses to get us to our destination. The maps themselves are telling us quite clearly where we must go—it is not the destination that requires illumination, but the shortest and most reliable routes to be pursued. And we must rely upon enlightened actions by States and civil society to lead the way.

This is a lesson I learned back in the late 1980s when I worked on the World Disarmament Campaign. Civil society has enormous contributions to make in moving the nuclear disarmament agenda forward. The importance of activities of organisations such as the Middle Powers Initiative cannot be denied. I welcome the close cooperation that exists between my office and MPI and hope to see it expand in the coming years.

Finally, I would like to conclude by encouraging all participants to include in your discussions the question of how the United Nations—including specifically its Office for Disarmament Affairs—can help in completing the historic journey that lies ahead.

Please accept my best wishes for a productive meeting.