The Strategic Concept of Disarmament

By

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Panel on
“The future of multilateral non-proliferation regimes and initiatives:
the perspective of international organizations and conventions”

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I am deeply grateful for this opportunity to join you today at this annual NATO Conference. Yet my gratitude is not just personal. I wish to compliment the organizers for including “Disarmament” as a principal subject, along with Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

It is also fitting that this Panel would feature the views of international organizations and conventions about the future of multilateral non-proliferation regimes and related initiatives.

After all, the United Nations and NATO have long stood together for many common principles and goals. This is apparent in the first sentence of the Preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty, in which the parties reaffirmed their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter. The rest of that treaty referred specifically to some of the Charter’s most fundamental norms regarding the requirement for the peaceful settlement of disputes, the duty to refrain from the threat or use of force inconsistent with the Charter, and the advancement of the rule of law.

One important difference, of course, is that the North Atlantic Treaty says nothing about disarmament, a goal also found in the Charter—one that has been a core objective of the United Nations as an institution since the General Assembly adopted its first resolution in January 1946. The UN is not, of course, a regional alliance and certainly not one that relies on nuclear deterrence. Our concept of security is not weapon-based but grounded in the fundamental norms of the Charter, reinforced by the process of disarmament and the limitation of conventional arms. Our work focuses on the interests of all our Member States. And our membership is global.

Nevertheless, both NATO and the United Nations have changed in many ways since their establishment and I believe there has been a significant amount of convergence. We have faced new challenges. Our membership has expanded. And we have had to adapt our policies, priorities, objectives, and structures to keep up with these new demands.

What I find most striking are not the many differences that distinguish us, but the many common goals we share.

We are each working on conventional arms control, curbing the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, preventing both the global proliferation and acquisition by non-State actors of weapons of mass destruction, while also promoting universal membership and full compliance with all multilateral WMD treaties. And especially during a global financial crisis, we all share a common interest in restraining the growth of military expenditures, which last year again exceeded $1.7 trillion.

The many challenges we are facing are difficult and will require extensive cooperation among many countries over many years. On nuclear disarmament, NATO agreed at its summit in Chicago last year that the allies shared a common vision of “creating the conditions necessary for a world without nuclear weapons”. From a nuclear alliance, this language is welcome.

Yet when it comes to necessary conditions, surely non-proliferation is also a goal that will advance when its own necessary conditions are met. And in the eyes of most UN Member States, significant progress on disarmament is one such condition. I note that both final documents adopted by consensus at the 2000 and 2010 NPT Review Conferences stated, and I
quote: “the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons”. That is quite a statement, since it points to a security guarantee far greater than is available from nuclear deterrence itself or any other alternative.

It is not at all surprising therefore that disarmament would be part of the “grand bargain” at the heart of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and in countless General Assembly resolutions—all of which indicate that nuclear disarmament is not simply a distant aspiration, but a responsibility shared by all States deserving—as Hamlet would say—“the name of action”.

In this sense, the elimination of all threats of proliferation must never be viewed as a precondition for the achievement of nuclear disarmament, just as the achievement of a nuclear-weapon-free world must not become a prerequisite for progress in non-proliferation. We have addressed this sequencing dilemma at the UN by bypassing it entirely. In both the Secretariat and among the vast majority of our Member States, we believe that both goals are mutually reinforcing and must be pursued vigorously together. Indeed, at the UN we have been pursuing both the elimination of WMD and the limitation and regulation of conventional armaments for 67 years. These are among our most durable and most solemn objectives.

This is the only fair and effective way to avoid what might be called a pre-conditions race, with one bloc of countries demanding Step A as a precondition for Step B, and another block arguing *vice versa*. This is a sure recipe for the type of deadlock we have been witnessing for many years at the Conference of Disarmament.

In terms of the future of the various international non-proliferation regimes, the continued pursuit of this holistic approach will be absolutely essential. Nobody should assume that any regime structured on a have/have-not principle can be sustained forever, a point that is reflected in many of the stresses being experienced in the NPT regime. These strains were most recently aggravated by the failure to convene a mandated conference last year on establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. And sure enough, a contentious debate over “conditions” was once again at the heart of the matter.

Together, you in NATO and we at the UN must find a way to rekindle a sense of our common interests. One of NATO’s first Secretaries General, Paul-Henri Spaak, had earlier served as the first President of the UN General Assembly. As that Assembly opened, he called upon all delegations to remember—in advancing their own particular national interests—that these interests must, in his words, “take their place in the wider setting of the general interest.” I think that is good advice today in advancing the common interest in achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

It is in this spirit that we should consider certain policies that are causing stresses in the global nuclear non-proliferation regime—I am referring here to ongoing modernization programmes for nuclear bombs, warheads, delivery vehicles, and the infrastructures to produce and maintain them; the foreign deployment of tactical nuclear weapons; the perpetuation of the first-use nuclear doctrine; and the maintenance of nuclear weapons on high-alert status. These activities are important to view not just in the context of a single alliance, but also from the standpoint of how they look to those outside the alliance who are working to eliminate such
weapons all together.

In this respect, the growing interest being expressed worldwide—at the recent Oslo conference on the subject, at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and at the General Assembly—for approaching nuclear weapons from a humanitarian perspective, all remind me of those wise words uttered so many years ago about the “wider setting of the general interest”. We may well discover that it is precisely in advancing the general interest that we will be best able to advance our individual interests.

So I will conclude by suggesting that the time may have come for NATO to consider adopting a Strategic Concept paper devoted just to nuclear disarmament. It is not sufficient simply to note the existence of a goal and to subject its achievement to numerous conditions. A world free of nuclear weapons is in fact not just a normative goal—it must also be a strategic goal, in the highest national security interests of each member of this alliance, and each member of the world community. To be meaningful, a strategic goal requires the articulation of concrete measures to achieve it, a plan of action, and a process for reviewing progress made in implementing it and for responding to setbacks along the way.

It should not be that difficult to devise such a strategy, since many of its benchmarks have already been agreed in consensus multilateral documents adopted both at the UN and at NPT arenas. I believe such a Strategic Concept paper would go far in helping to clarify that when the members of this Alliance speak of nuclear disarmament, they take it seriously not just as a noble goal to be achieved in some distant era, but as an objective to be rooted in the individual laws and policies of each member state, and a guiding star for future cooperation within the Alliance.

I have limited my remarks today mostly to nuclear weapons because I view them as the most dangerous and indiscriminate of all WMD, though the basic humanitarian values that inspire nuclear disarmament initiatives also apply to the elimination of both biological and chemical weapons. This is the common denominator that unites all the various WMD non-proliferation regimes—and the stronger this bond, the better will be the prospects for the future of those regimes. We share a great common cause in pursuing the elimination of all such weapons and we all—NATO included—have important roles to play in achieving this great goal. I very much look forward to your future initiatives and your support for efforts at the UN to fulfil its historic mandates in this field.