The United Nations and Disarmament

Remarks by Virginia Gamba
Director of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs
Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs

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Let me say at the outset how grateful I am to the Permanent Mission of Egypt to the United Nations for this opportunity to speak with you today. Egypt has a long history of diplomatic efforts to advance disarmament goals—both globally and regionally—and I have every reason to believe that some of you in this room today will no doubt participate in extending this tradition in the years to come.

One question I often encounter is, “why disarmament?” After all, there are many ways of pursuing a country’s security interests. Several countries have decided to acquire nuclear weapons for purposes of deterrence—or to enhance their status. For them, nuclear weapons offer what they say is an “ultimate guarantee” of security. Others have rejected nuclear weapons but are spending heavily on conventional forces for very diverse purposes that combine military, political, and economic factors and interests. Some countries find security in joining alliances. So what is it about disarmament that justifies viewing it as a means to enhance security and why has it been pursued for so long specifically at the United Nations?

Well, the UN has actually been pursuing two types of controls over weapons, on parallel tracks, since 1946. The first is “disarmament”—encompassing the total elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. And the second is called “the regulation of armaments”—which relates to conventional arms control. These are terms found in the UN Charter and we take both of them very seriously.

It really is not that surprising that the UN would provide the forum for global action to address these challenges. Consider for a moment the conditions that existed in the year 1946. The world had just emerged from the world’s most devastating war. Some 72 million people perished in that war—over half of them civilians. About a quarter million were killed in the nuclear attacks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Our Member States have also long been aware of the burdens of growing military expenditures and their opportunity costs in terms of the availability of resources for social and economic development. Last year, global military spending exceeded $1.7 trillion—that comes to over $4 billion a day, which alone is almost twice the regular UN budget for an entire year.

The cost of developing nuclear weapons has been—literally—astronomical. A 1998 study by the Washington-based Brookings Institution reported that the total historical US expenditure on nuclear weapons was over $5.6 trillion. They calculated that a stack of one-dollar bills containing that amount would go from here to the moon and almost all the way back. And that estimate applied to only one country … over a decade ago.

The real answer why disarmament and conventional arms control have been pursued at the UN for so many years is because our Member States recognize them as serving their interests. The disagreements and setbacks seldom relate to these basic objectives, but rather concern disputes over the means to achieve them. Since 1959, the UN General Assembly has combined both of these goals into an integrated concept called “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” or GCD. This is a term that is now found in a dozen multilateral treaties, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and all the treaties establishing
regional nuclear-weapon-free zones. At its first Special Session on disarmament in 1978, the General Assembly declared GCD to be the world’s “ultimate objective” in this field.

These therefore are our basic goals. Now, how do we pursue them, especially when the most fundamental decisions on weapons are made by individual Member States?

We do so by promoting global norms—ranging from binding legal commitments in treaties, to non-binding political declarations of one form or another—that together set some common international expectations about what States are committed to pursue in mutual relations when it comes to weaponry. The functions of deliberating, establishing, modifying, and maintaining such norms are the responsibility of the various components of what we call the “UN disarmament machinery”.

The venue where the most preliminary work of developing such norms is undertaken is in the UN Disarmament Commission, which meets for three weeks each year and typically focuses on two issues: one relating to nuclear weapons, and the other relating to conventional arms. After a three-year cycle of such meetings, its Members try to reach a consensus on common “guidelines” or declarations for dealing with the subjects on its agenda. This work is not easy—the last such consensus in the UN Disarmament Commission was reached in 1999.

The next step up this ladder of norm development is the General Assembly’s First Committee, which adopts annually over 50 resolutions on a full gamut of subjects ranging from nuclear weapons to small arms, and extending even into the heavens as space weapons are addressed. Nuclear weapons resolutions have typically resulted in divided votes, at times with over 50 Member States voting either against or to abstain.

The next venue is the 65-member Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, which has been designated as the world’s “single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum”. In other words, this is the place where legally binding disarmament norms are to be produced. Unfortunately, the CD has not been able to negotiate any treaty since 1996, when it considered the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. It operates by a consensus that essentially holds that “unless everything is agreed, nothing is agreed”—and its Member States have divergent priorities. Some want nuclear disarmament first; some emphasise non-proliferation; and some want to outlaw space weapons.

In terms of the UN’s Office for Disarmament Affairs, we provide Secretariat assistance in all of these venues. We advise the Secretary-General, assist the Permanent Missions to the United Nations, and also work closely with civil society to advance disarmament goals. We also provide various services and training to our Member States—for example, we organize workshops and seminars to promote implementation of Security Council Resolution 1540 relating to the prevention of the proliferation or acquisition by non-State actors of weapons of mass destruction. We oversee the work of three Regional Centres for peace and disarmament in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and the Asia/Pacific. There is no UN Regional Centre in the Middle East, though I frankly do believe a good case could be made to establish one.
All of what I have said so far begs the question—what impact has the UN had in this field of disarmament, given that thousands of nuclear weapons remain, the lack of universal membership in the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, and the trillions of dollars that are still being spent for military purposes?

Actually—our impact has been considerable. We—and I mean here collectively the Secretary-General, the Secretariat, the various parts of the disarmament machinery, and our Member States—have established a concrete agenda for cooperative international action in this field. We are shaping the terms of the global debate on weapons issues. We are helping to establish and maintain international expectations about the behaviour of States.

This is most immediately apparent in the conclusion of several multilateral treaties. It is seen in the widespread agreement that now exists in the world over standards that should be incorporated in multilateral disarmament agreements—these include verification, irreversibility, transparency, universality, and bindingness. It is also important to note that the standards for establishing regional nuclear-weapons-free zones were hammered out in the Disarmament Commission.

Let me ask, how many States today are touting biological or chemical weapons as the ultimate means of ensuring national security? Rather, such weapons have been successfully banned from the arsenals of virtually every State. And consider all the steps that States have taken in recent years, on their own, in fulfilment of their treaty commitments, or pursuant to obligations under Security Council resolution 1540 (2004) to strengthen their national controls against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to other States or to non-State actors.

Consider also the fact that the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the NPT are all approaching universal membership, and the overwhelming majority of their Parties have an excellent record of compliance.

Consider the overwhelming support that exists today both in the UN and in civil society, for efforts to begin negotiating a nuclear weapons convention, or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments with the same objective. This has been a key initiative included in the Secretary-General’s nuclear disarmament proposal of 24 October 2008.

We have an important role in conferring legitimacy for collective actions, and in voicing disapproval for actions that are inconsistent with those norms. In theory, if not always in practice, the norms we develop are both substantively fair—to the extent that they do not involve discrimination or double standards—and are produced through a process that is open to the participation of all Member States. I believe this is the real foundation of the legitimacy of the norms we advance here at the UN.

I know all of you are interested in the initiative advanced at the 2010 NPT Review Conference to convene an international conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Our Secretary-General is one of the co-convenors—along with the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States. Although the conference was not held in 2012 due to some unresolved political issues,
there is very strong support both worldwide and within this region for this conference to take place, as I do believe it will, hopefully this year.

In the field of conventional arms, we are very pleased that the Arms Trade Treaty was finally negotiated at the United Nations this year, a welcome development in expanding the rule of law as it applies to such weaponry. We are working to prevent the international illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. We are also trying to strengthen the UN’s transparency instruments—the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the Report on Military Expenditures.

So once again we ask why disarmament? This is because disarmament is not an end in itself, but because of the many benefits for international peace and security that will accompany progress in this area. While progress in disarmament is absolutely indispensable for the long-term success of non-proliferation efforts, it is of course equally true that the continued global spread of weapons of mass destruction will prevent the achievement of disarmament, largely as a result of the perpetuation and spread of what the Secretary-General has called the “contagious” doctrine of deterrence. Hence, both disarmament and non-proliferation are needed: they are the two wheels of the bicycle that will take us to a world without nuclear weapons. They must be pursued simultaneously, not sequentially. Peace and security are best viewed as beneficiaries of disarmament – not as preconditions for it to occur.

Yes, we still have a lot of work to do at the UN to advance disarmament, and so do our Member States. When it comes to the UN’s role, I cannot help but remember what Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld once about this organization. He said, “The United Nations was created not to lead mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell”. We believe strongly that progress in both disarmament and the regulation of armaments is absolutely essential for this fundamental goal to be achieved.

I will conclude by wishing all of you, as new additions to Egypt’s diplomatic corps, my very best as you commence your challenging careers. I hope to see some of you soon working on disarmament issues. The work is not easy, but must be done and it is deeply rewarding to work on behalf of such a great cause for all humanity. Welcome, all of you, to the United Nations . . . and to disarmament.