Moving Towards a Nuclear Weapon Free World: Conditions for Nuclear Stability at Low Numbers

Brainstorming Roundtable

Remarks

By

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1 The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily of the United Nations.
Session 2:
What is the process for getting to a world with much lower numbers of nuclear weapons?

It’s been said that “where you stand depends on where you sit” and this applies to my remarks today—the views of one person who works in the UN Secretariat on disarmament issues.

This Session is focused on issues relating to “process”—the “how’s” of disarmament, or more precisely, the how’s of achieving stability at low numbers. A fully comprehensive disarmament approach would have to explore how to achieve the next step of stability at zero nuclear weapons. Such an approach would have to examine a full range of relevant actors in this process, beyond the narrow focus on the nuclear-weapons states. This approach would finally have to ensure that the pursuit of “stability at low numbers” is in fact a “step” toward disarmament rather than a nuclear arms control plateau or end-state—there is a need to avoid conflating the old goal of nuclear disarmament with nuclear arms control.

The goal of achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world is not new—it appeared in the General Assembly’s first Resolution, adopted in 1946, and is one of the oldest goals of the UN organization. Since then, the UN has been pursuing the “elimination” of all nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and the “limitation and regulation” of conventional arms—here, conventional arms control and WMD disarmament are viewed as mutually reinforcing goals, to be pursued simultaneously, not sequentially. This is the essence of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” (GCD), which was adopted by the General Assembly at its 1978 first Special Session on disarmament as the world’s “ultimate objective”—GCD appears as such a goal in a dozen multilateral treaties (including the NPT and 5 regional nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties). The idea here is that both are needed, so that a nuclear-weapon-free world would not be a venue for endless conventional wars.

Unfortunately, the rule of law has evolved very unevenly in these fields—treaties have abolished chemical and biological weapons, yet there is still no convention outlawing nuclear weapons, and very little treaty law governing conventional arms. Meanwhile, many initiatives addressing nuclear weapons are focused exclusively on regulating such weapons, rather than eliminating them outright. No treaty has yet required the destruction of a single nuclear warhead or bomb.

The process of achieving zero will likely involve many more actors than the nuclear-weapons states. The process is political and is evolving on three dimensions: (a) the nation state (including domestic institutional players); (b) the international diplomatic community (encompassing not just blocs of states like the “North”, the “South” or the Non-aligned Movement but also cross-cutting coalitions like the New Agenda Coalition, which had a significant impact at the 2000 NPT Review Conference); and (c) civil society (including both national and international networks like ICAN, Global Zero, and many others.)

With respect to the nation state, the nuclear-weapon states in particular, one of its most notable features is the absence of institutional infrastructures for implementing disarmament commitments—namely, disarmament agencies, legislation, regulations, policies, and budgets. This is arguably the most difficult “institutional deficit” in the nuclear disarmament business. There are nuclear-weapons “complexes”, but no disarmament complexes. Yet disarmament
negotiators will require such institutional support during the difficult process of undertaking disarmament negotiations; resources must be available to prepare responses to views of disarmament critics; and there must be a systematic effort to educate the public about the benefits of disarmament, and the risks of failing to pursue it.

At the level of the international diplomatic community, efforts are underway in many venues to promote disarmament norms. The IAEA is strengthening controls in safeguarding the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and materials. The International Committee on the Red Cross is emphasizing the abiding relevance of international humanitarian law, in particular vis-à-vis any use of nuclear weapons. The UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) provides support for several multilateral conferences and events, including NPT Review Conferences (and sessions of their Preparatory Committees), as well as activities in the UN disarmament machinery (First Committee, Disarmament Commission, and Conference on Disarmament).

Efforts have been underway at the UN to improve transparency in the nuclear disarmament process. On 24 October 2008, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called upon the nuclear-weapon states to provide additional information to the UN Secretariat on their arsenals, their holdings of fissile materials and specific disarmament achievements, with a view to ensuring the wider dissemination of such information to the public. On 8 December 2009, he reiterated this call, proposing the establishment of a “registry” for such purposes. At the 2010 NPT Review Conference, participants adopted by consensus a 64-point Action Plan that included Action 21, which invited the Secretary-General “to establish a publicly accessible repository” for information relating to the implementation of nuclear disarmament commitments. UNODA has established a place-keeper on its web site for this specific purpose, while the nuclear-weapon states continue their consultations on next steps to improve transparency.2

Meanwhile, civil society is making its own important contributions to the global nuclear disarmament process—by educating the public, by public advocacy, and by working to shape policy agendas. This encompasses far more than disarmament groups per se. It is not just the number of groups, but their variety that is significant, including: women; environmentalists; human rights activists; lawyers; doctors; city and national legislators; religious leaders; et al. Mayors for Peace has now gained the support of representatives from over 5000 cities.

In terms of how to move this process forward, there are several “Do’s” and “Don’ts” to consider.

One of the greatest challenges for disarmament advocates is to engage more actively with the substantive arguments used by critics of disarmament. A thorough review of anti-disarmament literature and statements yields essentially 12 arguments—the “dirty dozen”—that have been recycled over several decades. In brief summary, they argue the following about disarmament: (1) it is utopian/impractical; (2) it is dangerous (e.g., will undermine NATO, encourage proliferation by states once covered by the nuclear umbrella); (3) more urgent priorities exist (typically, non-proliferation and counter-terrorism); (4) it is irrelevant (i.e., proliferation choices are not made in response to policies of the nuclear-weapon states); (5) it is best seen as an “ultimate goal” or mere “vision”; (6) it denies the great value of nuclear weapons in “keeping the peace”, sustaining order, deterring both nuclear and conventional wars; (7) it is unenforceable; (8) it is unverifiable; (9) it would open-up the spectre of large-scale conventional wars; (10) it

2 The site is located at http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/Repository/.
denies that nuclear weapons are a cheaper way to prevent wars than relying on conventional arms alone; (11) it fails to recognize that nuclear weapons are only “dangerous” when they are in the “wrong hands”; and (12) it fails to concede that nuclear weapons “cannot be disinvented”.

Effective rebuttals to all of these would come from full satisfaction of the five multilaterally agreed standards for reliable disarmament agreements—namely, verification; transparency; irreversibility; universality; and bindingness. The fulfilment of these standards would go far indeed in clearing away most if not all leading anti-disarmament arguments, thereby removing many of the political obstacles in the process of achieving global zero. Recent (and growing) efforts to frame any use of nuclear weapons as inherently inconsistent with international humanitarian law is also helpful in strengthening the “taboo” on both use and possession.

As for the “Don’ts”—these include arguments that actually make disarmament more difficult to achieve. These include: a proliferation of conditions/preconditions for disarmament to occur—some such conditions have included the prior achievement of “world peace”, a final solution to the “problem of war”, an end to all proliferation and WMD terrorism risks, solution of all regional disputes, and other such terms that serve only to postpone disarmament indefinitely. Other “Don’ts” include: referring to nuclear disarmament as an “ultimate goal” (a term the world community reserves for GCD); arguments that the “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons should be to deter nuclear attacks (which only serves to further legitimize possession, retention, and proliferation if not actual use); the pursuit of “stability at low numbers” as an end-state rather than a stepping stone to zero; building new nuclear weapons while “disarming” old ones; pursuing conventional arms supremacy in a nuclear disarmed world (this assumes global acceptance of a global conventionally armed hegemon); issue actual or implied nuclear threats (e.g. “all options are on the table” for dealing with various disputes); acceptance of “virtual” arsenals (i.e. those that can be rapidly reconstituted) as a desirable end-state for disarmament (this violates the norm of irreversibility); refusal to develop national plans for achieving commitments (with timetables, budgets and relevant institutions); issue policy statements/declarations heralding the indispensability of nuclear weapons (e.g. NATO’s “supreme guarantee of security”, which serves to rationalize both possession and acquisition); and insisting on re-opening a debate over “whether” nuclear disarmament is a worthy goal.

In conclusion, “stability at low numbers” is no substitute for the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. As the NPT States Parties declared at their 2000 and 2010 Review Conferences: “the total elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons”.