

Peace through Sustainable Disarmament

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Editor's Note:

Despite the major changes in the conditions affecting international security over the past years, the security order envisioned in the United Nations Charter remains closer to the interests and ideals of all states than its alternatives, writes Jayantha Dhanapala, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs.

In this article for IPS, Dhanapala writes that to fulfill the UN vision, we must clarify what role disarmament can and should play in achieving the Charter's aims.

We need to think of disarmament as an on-going process sustained by deliberate national and international efforts. The keys to achieving this goal will be found in sustainable disarmament.

Sustainable disarmament is not just about destroying weapons, but is defined by its links to other segments of the global agenda. It defends the basic human right of civilians to be free from the threat or use of weapons of mass destruction or conventional weapons, while protecting the right of every state under the Charter to legitimate means of self-defence.

There is an urgent need for a global consensus on disarmament and security in the context of the global UN agenda, particularly as some states continue to seek nuclear weapons while others endorse nuclear deterrence, the author states.

PEACE THROUGH SUSTAINABLE DISARMAMENT

By Jayantha Dhanapala (*)

UNITED NATIONS, Dec. - As we approach the new millennium, international peace and security

are increasingly effected by the dynamic forces of information, trade, and transportation, along with persisting inter-state rivalries, terrorist threats, chronic underdevelopment, social injustice, environmental crises, and the ever-growing lethality of weaponry.

All too often when serious international disagreements arise, the ancient rule of "might makes right" reasserts itself, and whenever this rule prevails, civilians suffer.

No state is immune to these conditions, and certainly not those that base their security solely upon weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons, as is often the case in situations of deterrence. Nor are well-governed and economically prosperous states. Indeed, if one includes the terrorist threats, virtually any state could become ground zero for an attack involving even the deadliest of weapons.

Yet through all this the United Nations Charter remains a beacon for harmonizing competing national interests and for weaving them into a coherent whole.

The security order envisioned in the Charter -- which rests on development, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the pursuit of security objectives with the least diversion of human and economic resources for armaments (Article 26) -- remains much closer to the interests and ideals of all states than its notorious alternatives.

A beacon, however, is not a panacea. It will take hard work to fulfill this vision and require clarification of what role disarmament can and should play in achieving the Charter's aims.

We need to think of disarmament as an on-going process sustained by deliberate national and international efforts. The keys to achieving this goal will be found in sustainable disarmament.

Many post-World War II security concepts already recognize that human security involves both military and non-military aspects. On 31 January 1992, the Security Council reminded the world that the absence of war and military conflicts amongst states does not in itself ensure international peace and security. The non-military sources of instability in the economic, social, humanitarian and ecological fields have become threats to peace and security.

We can all deepen our understanding of disarmament by considering progress in a closely related field, sustainable human development, as implemented by the UN. This concept embraces the wise use of finite resources, respect for the environment, the protection of human rights, and improvements in meeting basic human needs.

Through successive issues of the Human Development Report and other publications and statements, the late Mahbub Ul Haq suggested that broadening peoples' choices should be the common goal of human development and human security. The free market alone cannot achieve this goal in a sustainable or equitable manner.

Indeed, the need persists to forge a global consensus on disarmament and security in the context of the global UN agenda. This need is now particularly strong as some states continue to seek nuclear weapons while others maintain their fearful and discriminatory doctrines of nuclear deterrence. It will be increasingly difficult for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to act as a bulwark against nuclear proliferation if the world community ultimately fails to eliminate the weapons that threaten the sustainability of our planet.

With respect to conventional weapons, endless improvements in their accuracy and lethality -- coupled with their proliferation -- also jeopardize world peace. Even outer space may become a battleground if certain ambitious missile defense schemes are implemented.

Sustainable disarmament offers a positive alternative to these undesirable outcomes -- a prescription for peaceful change in an increasingly violent and over-armed world. It is not just about destroying weapons: as a security concept, it is defined by its links to other segments of the global agenda. It defends the basic human right of civilians to be free from the threat or use of weapons of mass destruction or conventional weapons, while simultaneously protecting the inherent right of every state under the Charter to legitimate means of self-defence.

Sustainable defence expenditures will broaden peoples' options for peaceful pursuits, just as sustainable defence doctrines will promote the transparency of weapons holdings, confidence-building measures, no-first-use agreements, non-aggression pacts, respect for international law, and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

In short, sustainable disarmament and sustainable human development are inseparable. That was a key lesson of the Cold War -- a lesson we have yet to follow as we enter the 21st century with about 36,000 nuclear warheads and global military expenditures running at an estimated USD 780 billion per annum.

According to the UN Development Programme, the investment of less than 10 percent of that amount would be sufficient to achieve universal access to education, water, sanitation, health, and nutrition in all developing countries.

The welfare of the peoples of the United Nations requires both sustainable disarmament and sustainable development -- and each requires not just words but action. New strategies and incentives are needed for disarmament in particular.

A fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament is needed to address the issue of sustainable disarmament and, in so doing, forge a consensus on a disarmament agenda and a programme of action to achieve it. At the last session of the General Assembly we again postponed fixing the objectives, an agenda, and a date for such a session. How much longer must we wait?

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