

Arms Control and Multilateralism: The Problem of Political Will

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Arms control, leadership, and multilateralism – the themes of today’s panel – are undoubtedly vital to international peace and security. And all are needed now more than ever. I would like this afternoon to address specifically their common denominator – political will – and to approach the subject, as requested, from my vantage point at the United Nations.

The starting place would have to be the ironic plight of arms control and disarmament since the end of the Cold War. In this period, global defence expenditures fell -- largely due of course to developments in the Russian Federation. Arms sales and arms production both declined, as did the frequency of inter-state wars. Even the total numbers of nuclear weapons have fallen, and membership in major international treaties – like the NPT, BWC, and CWC – has continued to increase. Yet while all of these are causes for celebration, why do major conferences like this -- which address vital issues of international peace and security -- continue to bear titles like, “*Conundrums in Arms Control*” instead of “*Achievements in Disarmament*”? Is this not a time

to rejoice?

My answer is both yes and no. It is of course important to recognize past victories. Yet the case for celebrating, however legitimate, is tempered by numerous causes for concern. There are, for example, disturbing signs that military expenditures are once again rising in many states. Horrific intra-state wars continue to slaughter countless combatants and innocent civilians. Arms purchases and arms exports are increasing in some countries, while defence modernization programmes are underway in many others. The world has witnessed a wave of mergers and acquisitions leading to a truly global defence industry. Last January, the German anti-corruption group Transparency International reported that the arms industry was second only to the construction sector in terms of the incidence of bribery. Military-industrial complexes in all countries must be wary of perpetuating arms races and allowing loopholes for illicit trade to flourish. There is still no global code of conduct for the arms industry to ensure that arms transfers are meeting legitimate defence needs, rather than simply maximizing profits or serving expedient political goals.

There are also reportedly over 30,000 nuclear weapons still in existence 32 years after the States Parties to the NPT agreed to “pursue negotiations in good faith” on nuclear disarmament. These terms from Article VI of the treaty were cited in the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, which added a unanimous view that the States Parties also had an obligation to “bring to a conclusion” such negotiations.

Yesterday’s vote by the Russian State Duma in favor of ratification of START II was a welcome event, indeed the first sign of major progress in strategic nuclear arms control in many years. Though the treaty does not *per se* require the physical destruction of any nuclear weapons, it does reduce the allowed numbers of deployed strategic nuclear weapons and prohibits certain strategic systems. Upon the full entry into force of the treaty, and satisfaction of the various conditions placed on ratification by the Russian Duma and the U.S. Senate, the world can now look forward to deeper cuts under a START III treaty.

Yet countries still fear the possible outbreak of an arms race in outer space. Soon the world may witness a race to acquire missile defence technology and -- as a tragic but all-too inevitable consequence -- new offensive missile capabilities. Meanwhile, states that possess nuclear weapons have re-affirmed – even extolled – the indispensability of such weapons despite international commitments to eliminate them. Without a CTBT or a fissile material treaty in force, the international community fears the possible resumption of nuclear testing or the production of even more fissile nuclear material, thereby adding to huge military and civilian stocks. There is little in either policy or law to prevent the creation someday of revolutionary new weapons of mass destruction. Additional concerns arise as the solid global norms of disarmament and non-proliferation are reinterpreted, or in strategic terms “dumbed-down,” so

that they would apply only to so-called “rogue nations” -- the new post-Cold War bogey. Meanwhile, multilateral disarmament forums like the Conference on Disarmament have been unable to agree on substantive work agendas. In such a climate it is perhaps not surprising to find various commentators proclaiming the “death of arms control.”

Unfortunately, we find that all too often the preferred response to these challenges is the resort to unilateralism, particularly as expressed in military and/or technical fixes. In such a context, leadership in disarmament has been most conspicuous in its absence. There is little cause for rejoicing in this scenario.

These, however, are not the only disturbing trends. There is also a crisis in the enforcement of global security norms. Many export controls are not universally agreed and are in many countries viewed as discriminatory and illegitimate, including controls relating to weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. Such controls are particularly difficult to sustain in the long term if they are seen as perpetuating technological monopolies, whether they be the indefinite possession of nuclear weapons or the means to produce fissile nuclear material suitable for use in such weapons. Someday soon, such double standards must be re-examined with a view to establishing equitable global standards, a step that may well entail material sacrifices for national and international security.

Such steps are unlikely to occur without leadership or by the assertion of popular will. The unique process that resulted in the Mine Ban Convention is an illustration of how broad-based coalitions can create a wave of popular pressure compelling governments to act in the interests of the common good.

Meanwhile, there is also no consensus on the terms and circumstances for the imposition of sanctions in defence of either non-proliferation or disarmament norms. This situation is further aggravated by deep divisions within the UN Security Council, the entity having primary responsibility under the UN Charter for the maintenance of international peace and security.

It is of course impossible to attribute the present state of affairs to any one factor, though if forced to do so, one must surely identify political will -- a sword that can cut both ways. Political will can help account for the persistence of policies that advocate military and technical fixes to proliferation threats, just as the lack of it has jeopardized multilateral approaches to international peace and security, particularly disarmament. Political will is even implicit in the very terms that leaders use to describe current policies. For example, we hear a lot about stockpile stewardship, but little about the needs of the stewardship of global disarmament norms.

Any serious examination of the problem of “political will” must also come to grips with the issue of popular will. Multilateralism does not just happen spontaneously. It is cultivated by leaders in

national and international institutions, with the support of individuals and groups in civil society -- including the media, religious institutions, private foundations, national research laboratories, academia, veterans groups, and business and industry. Leadership is crucial in this respect, leadership not driven by political expediency -- such as by the polls or electoral considerations -- but leadership based upon a vision of a better future for all.

Democratic good governance teaches that as more diverse and representative segments of society are allowed to participate in decision making on issues that affect the collective good, the more likely it will be that society will benefit from intrinsically equitable and durable results. This is as true for national decision making as it is throughout the general conduct of international affairs. Multilateral diplomacy is especially necessary in the negotiation of disarmament agreements that are so vital to international peace and security.

Multilateralism dies, however, if it lacks roots, as surely as it will die if it lacks careful tending. Genuine multilateralism consists of a fusion of dedicated governmental leadership and public support -- support that is rooted in common perceptions throughout society in the ideals and self interests to be served by such approaches to global security problems. To achieve such a consensus, the general public must be given the facts about the actual and potential benefits from multilateralism -- and the actual and potential costs of unilateralism.

These observations apply to many issues on the non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament agendas. They apply to the design and application of measures to enforce existing norms. They apply to verification. They apply to the process of negotiating new norms or re-invigorating old ones. They apply to how society makes decisions on budget priorities and in allocating responsibilities throughout its public bureaucracy. Understanding political will also helps to comprehend the motivations that inspire other countries to seek or retain weapons of mass destruction, not to mention the readiness of countries to help other countries to acquire such weapons.

Effective approaches to global problems like nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation will require the collective political will of many nations -- in other words, multilateralism. In 1995, the States Parties of the NPT decided -- without a vote -- to extend the treaty indefinitely, an action that reflected a collective political will to ensure that the obligations of that treaty would both remain permanent and be fulfilled by all its parties. It is useful to recall such accomplishments at a time when multilateralism is so often criticized as ineffective or idealistic. To the contrary, multilateralism is just another word for how the world community goes about doing its business in an all-too real world.

The United Nations contributes to the pursuit of multilateral approaches to disarmament in many ways. Our broader public education functions are served by our various publications, our

speeches, the symposia we organize, and even by our departmental web site. We assist Member States in mobilizing political will by organizing major international conferences, such as the Five-Year Review Conference of the NPT which begins on 24 April -- just 10 days hence. In his Millennium Report, Secretary-General Annan has also proposed the convening of a major international conference that would help to identify ways to eliminate nuclear dangers -- a forum that should also help to re-ignite the political will needed for further progress on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

The UN also provides a unique global forum for debate, which includes deliberations in the UN General Assembly, its First Committee, and the UN Disarmament Commission. We attach great importance to facts and analytic excellence, as is evident in the quality of the work produced by the UN Institute for Disarmament Research. Through the Disarmament Fellowship Programme, we have worked to educate an entire new generation of young disarmament officials from throughout the world. Though we work under enormous financial constraints, we take pride in what we are working to accomplish. We do not have all the solutions, but we understand the global scope of the problems and appreciate deeply the vital roles to be played by political will in solving such problems.

In his Millennium Report, Secretary-General Kofi Annan notes that while the UN exists to serve its Member States, it also has a broader mission under its Charter. In his words, the UN "has the avowed purpose of transforming relations among states, and the methods by which the world's affairs are managed." The most fundamental goal of the UN -- indeed its *raison d'être* -- is to serve the needs and hopes of people everywhere. And it is precisely here that the activities of the UN will ultimately find their legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, neither leadership nor multilateralism alone can produce global prosperity or world peace -- both are means which can be used to pursue an infinite variety of ends. Yet if the ends are chosen wisely, and leaders in nation-states and international organizations hold to them even in the face of sustained opposition, we have every reason to be optimistic about the future and to rejoice in the progress that lies ahead. In the final analysis, it is the political will exercised by leaders that will energize the multilateral process towards arms control and disarmament. The new millennium demands a new vision. Let us work together to shape this vision and see that it is fulfilled.