

**MULTILATERALISM VERSUS UNILATERALISM:
OVERCOMING THE DICHOTOMY IN DISARMAMENT**

By

Nobuyasu Abe

Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs

United Nations
New York, New York 10017



*United Nations Conference on Disarmament Issues in Kyoto
17-19 August 2005*

Thank you, Mr. Ishiguri.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to the Sixth United Nations Conference on Disarmament Issues in Kyoto organized by the Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific of the Department of Disarmament Affairs.

I would first like to express my most sincere gratitude to the Government of Japan for its consistent political and financial support for the activities of the Regional Centre, including this Kyoto Conference.

Our special appreciation goes to the City and the Prefecture of Kyoto for their hosting and financially supporting this international conference.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Mayor Masumoto, Governor Yamada and the citizens of the City and the Prefecture of Kyoto for their support and hospitality.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we are at a particularly difficult and challenging moment in disarmament and indeed world affairs more generally. It is by now old news to report that the 2005 NPT Review Conference failed to produce any substantive outcome last May. Some will have interpreted this as further evidence that the pursuit of a multilateral approach to disarmament is now seriously threatened – if not dominated – by more unilateralist tendencies. The true picture is, in my view, both more complex and not that negative.

By the way it may not be fair to use the expression “unilateralism” because it almost automatically carries a negative connotation today. But in the absence of any other easy way to express all the approaches short of the multilateral approach let me use this terminology in my presentation today without any negative implication.

While it is undeniable that the traditional multilateral disarmament framework is suffering from a loss of confidence and momentum, I do not accept that there is necessarily a simple dichotomy between multilateralism and unilateralism. Indeed it was precisely because of this realisation that the Secretary-General established the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change and sought advice on how to revitalize the multilateral machinery to tackle new threats and challenges.

History shows that multilateral efforts and unilateral efforts have in fact proceeded in tandem and have often complemented one another in helping to advance the causes of disarmament and non-proliferation. The present, as I hope to show, is no different.

Indeed such a comprehensive approach surely makes perfect sense. We should always beware of a ‘one size fits all’ approach in any area of activity. The very complexity of the issues with which we have to deal demands a multifaceted response from which it would be irresponsible to exclude all the options at our disposal.

If one takes as an example the NPT itself, it was started as a plurilateral effort, if not unilateral, to prevent further proliferation of nuclear weapons. It took decades to reach the current state of near universality. France and China only joined the treaty in the early 1990s. Brazil and Cuba joined within the last decade. It is also no longer a secret

that intensive efforts of the United States were a key factor behind the Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese commitments to stay non-nuclear.

There is no doubt that it might be better in ideal circumstances to promote disarmament and non-proliferation efforts in a multilateral framework, with all states around the world working in concert. But, alas, we do not enjoy anything like ideal circumstances. If multilateral frameworks are no longer seen to be either effective or helpful in preventing proliferation or promoting disarmament, some states will start looking for alternative ways. So, in my view, the way ahead must be to revitalize the multilateral frameworks for disarmament and non-proliferation as much as we can while we try to complement them with other initiatives that command wide international support from groups of countries intent on making effective progress wherever they can.

There can, for example, be no question that Export Control regimes in the nuclear, chemical and biological areas, as well as in missile technology, make an important contribution to stemming proliferation. The Proliferation Security Initiative with some 60 countries now involved is a further and perhaps more high profile example. It would be foolish in my view to reject these so-called 'unilateral' or 'plurilateral' efforts. In so far as they serve to reinforce the implementation of existing international Treaties and agreements they are mutually beneficial. Arms control is stronger and, more importantly, we are safer because of their existence.

Let me also caution here that I have no intention of promoting multilateralism for the narrow parochial interest of international organizations or the international civil servants who are working there.

The failure of the last NPT Review Conference was undoubtedly regrettable in many respects. A great opportunity was missed to renew the commitment by the nuclear weapon states for the ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons. The Conference also failed to address such urgent non-proliferation issues as the universalization of the Additional Protocol to the existing IAEA Safeguards mechanism or the new security concerns about the control of the nuclear fuel cycle.

The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva – one of the key fora of multilateral arms control – failed consequently to receive any guidance about the way in which it might address the long-awaited negotiations on a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT), as well as on such issues as Negative Security Assurances (NSAs) or the fundamental question of complete nuclear disarmament. The Review Conference could not even express its dismay at the announced withdrawal of DPRK (North Korea) from the Treaty.

Fully recognizing the serious confrontation between those who put nuclear disarmament first against those who attach greater priority to non-proliferation, the UN Secretary-General urged the participants at the very beginning of the Review Conference to work seriously on both nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation and specifically

called upon them not to hold either issue hostage to the other. Unfortunately his advice was not heeded.

But the world does not stand still and for our part we cannot afford to stand idly by. We need to take practical steps to ensure the continuing health and strength of the NPT. This remains a matter of central importance because the imminent proliferation risk is still there. The loophole brought to light by discovery of the A.Q. Khan network of illicit supply, DPRK (North Korea) and Iran, to name a few, continue to dominate the headlines. Strategic nuclear warheads are still numbered in their thousands and remain on hair-trigger alert while “Non-strategic” nuclear weapons remain in vast quantities.

One first opportunity for world leaders to address the serious concerns about nuclear proliferation and disarmament will present itself in September when Heads of State and Government assemble in New York to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan recommended last March a series of measures for adoption at the September Summit in his report to the General Assembly titled “In Larger Freedom.” I strongly hope that the September Summit will acknowledge the importance of the challenge we face in the area of disarmament and non-proliferation. It is therefore very encouraging to note that on 26 July the Foreign Ministers of Australia, Chile, Indonesia, Norway, Romania, South Africa and the United Kingdom announced an initiative they jointly described as “a contribution to the current debates at the United Nations in the field of nuclear disarmament and proliferation”. If this proposal is successfully incorporated into the formal declaration to be announced on the occasion of the Summit, it will be a powerful reaffirmation of the global prohibitions on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons. It is also precisely the type of intervention by like-minded states in direct support of multilateral agreements to which I alluded earlier. No contradiction or dichotomy therefore, but rather an invaluable reinforcement at a difficult time.

As I am sure you are all aware, the current disarmament landscape appears to be dominated by a pervasive sense of inertia. The Conference on Disarmament has been in its grip for many years now and it has also been affecting the Disarmament Commission in New York. The NPT Review Conference was in some respects merely its latest victim. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has to break the deadlock on its substantive programme of work to start working on such issues as the entire issue of nuclear disarmament, Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, negative security assurance and PAROS (the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space) to name a few.

But as an almost inevitable consequence of the inertia and lack of momentum affecting the more traditional arms control machinery, it is important to be aware that the challenge of proliferation continues to be met by like-minded States in other more immediate and practical ways.

I consider this development to be both welcome and positive in that it demonstrates the continuing commitment of the vast majority of member states of the UN to dealing with the threat of WMD via other avenues such as the Proliferation Security Initiative and the Nuclear Suppliers Group to cite but two examples. Other venues for action similarly show evidence of a flexible range of responses and approaches.

The IAEA is now the pre-eminent forum for discussion and implementation of many aspects of NPT implementation. The Agency is expected to follow up the work of the Expert Group on Multilateral Approaches to the Nuclear Fuel Cycle. The IAEA will be maintaining its effort to universalize the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and the Additional Protocol – hopefully the new global standard for verification. The eyes of the world will be watching its deliberations on 3 September when it next discusses the issue of Iranian compliance with its resolutions.

The full implementation of Security Council resolution 1540 will greatly help close the gaps existing in the non-proliferation regime. The 1540 Committee of the Security Council is currently examining the national reports submitted by the U.N. Member States. There are many measures to be taken to establish domestic laws and regulations to criminalize activities concerning proliferation of WMD to non-state actors and to establish and tighten export and border controls. Workshops and seminars can be usefully organized to promote the implementation of such measures. The Committee is in the beginning phase of the process of facilitating technical assistance to those Member States which are in need of practical and technical support.

The work of the Committee perhaps best exemplifies what might be called the “new arms control” and is a demonstration of the fusion of the multilateral approach, embracing and recognizing the importance of what once would have been dismissively referred to as ‘unilateral’ measures. Furthermore, it has the potential to place the UN once again at the heart of effective international efforts to stem proliferation and combat the menace of terrorist use of WMD.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a much brighter picture to portray when it comes to small arms and light weapons. An Open-Ended Working Group of the General Assembly reached an agreement last June on a draft International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons.

By this instrument, the States committed themselves to, *inter alia*, marking all SALW at the time of their manufacture; taking all necessary measures to ensure that all SALW in the possession of government armed and security forces for their own use are duly marked; ensuring that accurate and comprehensive records are established for all marked SALW within their territory; and providing prompt, timely and reliable responses to tracing requests made by other States.

In July the Second Biennial Meeting of States held an intensive discussion preparing for the first review conference of the Programme of Action on SALW, which will be held in July next year. I see Ambassador Patokallio who chaired the biennial meeting. So, I look forward to hearing from him about the Biennial Meeting.

I do not have time to go into detail but there is another element to supplement the multilateral approach. That is the regional dimension including efforts to build nuclear weapon free zones. In this respect I should point to the significant contribution that the U.N. Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific is making. I also wish to mention the Centre's contribution in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation education.

In conclusion, I believe that it will be important to draw correct lessons from the setback undoubtedly suffered at the 2005 NPT Review Conference. The basis for future success lies in the analysis we make now and the actions we then take forward. The outlook is far from being uniformly bleak. I detect continuing and strong commitment to the international norm established by the NPT from the vast majority of its State Parties. International action against proliferation continues to be conducted at an enhanced level whether it be through the IAEA Additional Protocol, UNSCR 1540, the Proliferation Security Initiative or the work of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. All of these activities are ultimately founded on and further strengthen the foundation of non-proliferation that is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. They also demonstrate the range of tools we need in order to deal with the diverse and complex situations that are currently arising. We must use them all, because whether multilateral, unilateral or plurilateral, they are in fact complementary and directed towards the same goal.

There is therefore an urgent need for new and innovative thinking if we are to be equal to the challenges we face. In my opinion one important and vitally necessary step will be to leave arid debate and differences behind us and to recognise the necessity and coherence of the more comprehensive approach I have tried to put forward.

The agenda of the Kyoto Conference contains a number of urgent issues to be addressed by the international community. I hope this Conference will provide participants with an opportunity to hold frank exchange of views and to develop ways and means to meet the challenges in the field of security, disarmament and non-proliferation. I wish you a great successful meeting.

Thank you.

* * *

*

*

*