

Public Lecture

THE UNITED NATIONS AND DISARMAMENT:
Challenges and Opportunities

By

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Series on Changing Institutions

Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics (SITE) and
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

Stockholm, Sweden

28 February 2008

It is still only late February, here in Stockholm, but I already sense the coming arrival of a new spring. I am increasingly hopeful that the long winter of our discontents in the field of disarmament may finally be showing some signs of yielding not just a new season, but perhaps even a new age.

My cautious optimism may be influenced somewhat by my surroundings. I am, after all, in a country that has championed the cause of disarmament for many decades, along with other measures to strengthen international peace and security. I am in the country that produced Dag Hammarskjöld, Olof Palme, Anna Lindh, Alva Myrdal, Inga Thorsson, Hans Blix, and our host today, Rolf Ekeus – whom I had the honour of meeting in the mid-eighties, as the head of the Swedish delegation to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

Yet in Sweden, disarmament is not the business of the few, but a concern of all, as your citizens have consistently both understood and strongly supported responsible initiatives in the field of disarmament. They have done so to the point where support for disarmament has become a highly respected part of your national identity.

There are of course many reasons to support disarmament. Though it is a subject that has undergone some transformation over the years, the reasons for supporting it have largely remained the same. Some people cite moral or religious reasons – they abhor the development or use of weapons that are inherently indiscriminate in their effects, a characteristic of all weapons of mass destruction – namely, biological, chemical, and nuclear arms. Others have supported it for legal reasons, especially as it relates to the implementation of multilateral treaties and, in many countries, domestic law. And, as more is known about how disarmament actually works, more and more people are supporting it for the very practical reason that it actually does yield greater security than would be achievable without it.

I believe that the combination of these beliefs, tested by experience, provides the ultimate foundation upon which the future of disarmament will rest. Disarmament is the fusion of ideals and enlightened self-interest.

Disarmament also has some qualities of a living entity – it has had to adapt itself to changing international conditions, and in so doing, it has evolved into the notion that is with us today. Following this course, we can confidently predict that disarmament will continue to evolve in the years ahead, but not in any predetermined direction, as its transformation over time is entirely a function of human choices, reasoning, as well as shared perceptions among states of self-interest and a sense of responsibility to wider communities – including future generations. All of us who work in this field may not see the final achievement of each of its goals, but we know we are working for one of humanity's greatest causes.

Founded – as its Charter explains – to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, the United Nations has pursued disarmament goals since its creation. Disarmament is twice mentioned in the Charter, as well as the goal of ensuring “the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources” (Article 26) – which I suspect will be of some interest to those connected with the Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics. Indeed, the very first resolution adopted by the General Assembly – Resolution 1(I) of January 1946 – identified the goal of eliminating all weapons “adaptable to mass destruction”.

It is quite fair to say that disarmament is also very much part of the organizational identity of the United Nations. I view our work in the Office for Disarmament Affairs (ODA) as not only *consistent with*

other goals and missions of the United Nations, but in some ways, it is much more than that. Much of what the UN tries to accomplish in the world – in terms of global public goods – tacitly assumes that certain types of conflicts simply will not occur, especially those involving the use of WMD. I view progress in disarmament, therefore, as essential in shaping a world in which other goals – including the alleviation of poverty, protecting the environment, defending human rights, and promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes – can all be secured. This all helps to explain why the UN is working in this field, and has been for so many years.

The production, storage, transportation, and use of weapons of mass destruction; excessive accumulations and exports of conventional arms; the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons; and the seemingly never-ending process of developing new and improved weaponry – all these have profound consequences for international security. From the start, the United Nations recognized the importance both of disarmament – namely, the elimination of weapons of mass destruction – and arms regulation, which refers to reducing or limiting the use of conventional arms. In 1959, the General Assembly combined these goals into a term that had originally been coined during the days of the League of Nations – namely “general and complete disarmament” – which remains our “ultimate goal”.

The world, of course, has changed a lot since 1959. Grand efforts to achieve general and complete disarmament in one comprehensive arrangement have given way to pragmatic agreements on parts of the grander cause. Hence we have seen the emergence over the last five decades of five treaties creating nuclear-weapon-free zones – first in Latin America and the Caribbean, and then in the South Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia, and most recently Central Asia. Such weapons have been banned from placement on the seabed, in orbit, and even on the moon and other celestial bodies. Nor can they be deployed in Antarctica.

They can also not be legally tested in any environment except underground, and when the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty enters into force, even that loophole will finally be closed. In this connection, it is heartening to note that no tests have been conducted for over ten years by the nuclear-weapon states party to the NPT, and that any further test by those not party would undoubtedly be condemned by the entire world community.

Efforts have also been underway for decades both inside and outside the United Nations to prevent the global spread of such weapons. The parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) will mark the 40th anniversary of its signature this year, a significant achievement for a treaty that 189 states have joined, which brings it quite close to full universal membership. Only India, Israel, and Pakistan are non-parties and diplomatic efforts are now underway to encourage the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to resume its membership. The UN Security Council has adopted Resolution 1540, which creates a legal obligation for all states to prevent the proliferation or terrorist acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. The world community has also adopted the Nuclear Terrorism Convention, and is actively seeking to improve the physical security over fissile materials.

Outside the nuclear field, we have two multilateral conventions on biological and chemical weapons, which establish international taboos on the production, possession, and proliferation of such weapons. To its credit, the Conference on Disarmament – the world’s single multilateral negotiating forum for disarmament – was the common venue for negotiating those conventions. Ambassador Ekeus was there at this exciting time. One of the hallmarks of the Chemical Weapons Convention is its path-breaking verification system, which has already overseen the physical destruction of over 26,000 tons of lethal chemical agents. Currently the treaty has 183 states parties, an impressive achievement in itself.

With respect to biological weapons, the world community has long recognized the horrific dangers they pose not only to humans but also to economic assets like crops and livestock. Such concerns led to the conclusion of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) in 1972, which entered into force three years later. It now has 156 states parties.

As mandated at the BWC's Sixth Review Conference, an "Implementation Support Unit" was established in the Geneva Branch of ODA to support the meetings agreed by the Conference, to assist national implementation, and to promote universal participation in the Convention and confidence-building measures. The creation of this unit is another illustration of how the UN organization has sought to respond to evolving weapons developments worldwide, and this process of adaptation will no doubt continue.

Over the years, the world is becoming increasingly aware of the possible dangers from terrorist uses of biological weapons – dangers that are aggravated by the accessibility of much of the basic know-how and materials needed to make them. While the revolution in biotechnology offers new hope for curing diseases that have plagued humanity for millennia, it also poses its own new risks, including the engineering of new types of pathogens that are both more lethal and more resistant to medical treatments.

Just to illustrate for a minute how the process of disarmament adapts and evolves over the years, let us look at how the world community has been working to advance the greater disarmament and non-proliferation goals contained in the BWC. Historically, the BWC has been the forum to discuss and formulate relevant policies. Yet for political reasons and need for rapid implementation, Member States have deemed it necessary to encompass these new threats and concerns into the framework of international counter-terrorism efforts. General Assembly resolution 60/288 of September 2006, for example, provides a "United Nations global counter-terrorism strategy" for Member States and UN agencies – one that includes "preventing and combating terrorism", and "building state capacity to counter terrorism".

This resolution also invited the UN system to develop, together with Member States and relevant international organisations, a single comprehensive database on biological incidents. The database – which will likely be accessed as a secure web-based application on the ODA website – is intended to serve as a platform for receiving detailed technical information on biological incidents worldwide to assist in preventing and combating bioterrorism and to build state capacity. At present no international comprehensive data resource exists in this area, where data are directly provided by Member States and therefore can be considered "quality-controlled".

Needless to say, this is but one example of the "changing institutions" theme of your combined conference series – and it is not the only work that we do at the United Nations to address the scourge of biological and chemical weapons. The Secretary-General was encouraged in the Counter-Terrorism Resolution "to update the roster of experts and laboratories, as well as technical guidelines and procedures, available to him for the timely and efficient investigation of alleged use" of such weapons. The roster of experts and laboratories has been updated to 41 chemical experts from 13 countries and 197 biological experts from 34 countries as well as 59 analytical laboratories. In an ideal world with no threats, the United Nations would not need such a capability – in the world as it is, however, this clearly represents a capability that the United Nations will surely need to maintain in the years ahead.

As you can imagine, all of these various activities are keeping us busy in the UN Secretariat. To keep the Secretary-General of the United Nations abreast of the developments in the areas of WMD and non-

proliferation – and to implement our responsibilities under the Counter-Terrorism Strategy – we have been working to improve our analytical capabilities and expertise. A recent Foundation grant has enabled ODA to bridge a funding gap, which will enable us to recruit five experts who had worked on UNMOVIC – the former UN commission that monitored and verified disarmament in Iraq. They will be fully integrated within ODA and take up the additional tasks stemming from the implementation of the Counter-Terrorism Resolution.

Since my subject today is disarmament, I am reluctant to delve very deeply into issues relating to the limitation or reduction of conventional arms, which is another important part of our work at ODA. The UN Charter recognizes the right of states to self-defense. It has provisions that require states to contribute armed forces for certain roles relating to the enforcement of decisions of the Security Council. The Charter addresses the “regulation of armaments”, which recognizes that certain types of weapons are legitimate to possess for the limited purposes of maintaining national security and contributing to peacekeeping operations.

One of the most interesting developments in recent years concerns the proposal by the United Kingdom for an Arms Trade Treaty, which is receiving considerable attention at the UN and is also a subject of great interest to groups in civil society. The Group of Governmental Experts mandated by the General Assembly to examine the feasibility, scope, and parameters of such a treaty has just finished the first of its three meetings scheduled for this year in New York.

Members of the international community have also sought for many years to outlaw certain types of conventional arms that are deemed to be “inhumane” because of their uniquely destructive or indiscriminate effects. The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons bans such weapons as laser blinders and mines that produce shrapnel that cannot be viewed on X-rays. The Mine-Ban Convention, which seeks to outlaw anti-personnel landmines, is another significant international effort that concerns a particular type of conventional arms. Other efforts are underway to ban or limit the use of cluster munitions.

One of the UN’s most dynamic fields in this area concerns efforts to prevent the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, a subject that led to the adoption of a UN Programme of Action in 2001 to curb this trade. This is actually the focal point of many initiatives, meetings, and studies that are underway to improve export controls, encourage information sharing, deal with the problem of illicit brokering, promote the marking and tracing of firearms, and grapple with the control of ammunition.

Unfortunately, despite numerous studies and reports by groups of experts, the world community has made very little progress in developing multilateral norms for missiles. As missile ranges increase, as more states acquire them, and as the possible military roles of such missiles increase over the years, the greater will be the need for multilateral controls. The same lack of multilateral norms applies to delivery systems for other weapons of mass destruction, including, for example, long-range military bombers and strategic submarines. This is most unfortunate, since the preamble of the NPT itself envisions the elimination not just of nuclear weapons, but also the means of their delivery.

Yet multilateral norms, and the national and international institutions that seek to sustain them, are not created overnight. They evolve only through a difficult and at times prolonged process of dialogue, negotiation, political compromise, and consensus-building. At the UN we hear many proposals for multilateral cooperation.

We seek out and listen to the views from individuals and groups in civil society. We have programmes to promote education of the public on issues relating to disarmament and non-proliferation. We offer some common, global forums – including the General Assembly’s First Committee and the UN Disarmament Commission – for considering these various initiatives. We have some limited institutional machinery based in the Secretariat’s Office for Disarmament Affairs that can assist our member states in achieving their common purposes. We have a Security Council that is responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security. And we also have a Secretary-General who, like his predecessors, is committed to promoting disarmament.

As I conclude my brief survey of our activities in the field of disarmament, I am struck by how much of our work is dependent upon decisions made by states, who are in turn influenced both by the views of other states and by individuals and groups from civil society. I must say in this respect that SIPRI is of course one of the leading institutions in this field, and has been for many years. Your work has been invaluable to all those who participate in this process of engagement and dialogue, through which the world is slowly moving forward to overcome old obstacles.

The new challenges are numerous. We need to see significant progress in nuclear disarmament, as well as more effective controls against the proliferation or possible terrorist acquisition of all types weapons of mass destruction. We need to see this progress in nuclear disarmament registered in binding agreements – including at least some preliminary discussion on a nuclear-weapons convention – with provisions for transparency, verification, and irreversibility. We need to develop new multilateral norms in such areas as conventional arms and missiles, and in preventing the development of space weapons. We need to do more to educate the public, both so that they can help to encourage the implementation of enlightened policies, but also to train tomorrow’s leaders in national and international organizations. Frankly, we need to see more resources devoted to disarmament – recognizing that the world is now reportedly spending over \$1.2 trillion on defense, a stark contrast indeed to the microscopic sums that are devoted to disarmament activities.

Yet our opportunities are also numerous. There is ample room for deep cuts in nuclear arsenals, substantially expanded work on nuclear-weapons verification, and the improvement of nuclear safeguards and physical security. The nuclear disarmament initiatives known as the “Hoover Plan” – offered last year by former US officials George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn – has helped to revive serious international consideration of this vitally important goal. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has the possibility of entering into force, perhaps sooner rather than later. There is some potential for the consolidation of regional nuclear-weapon-free zones, by expanding their membership in some cases or encouraging the nuclear-weapon states to join the protocols to those treaties. The Conference on Disarmament in Geneva may yet agree to commence negotiations on a fissile material treaty, and discussions on nuclear disarmament, nuclear security assurances, and the prevention of an arms race in outer space – discussions that might one day evolve into negotiations on new conventions.

In the words of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, “The world must cross the bridge between what is and what ought to be”. In other words, we must move from challenges and opportunities to concrete results. I know that the leaders and citizens of Sweden will persist in their pursuit of an ambitious disarmament agenda, and I wish today to express my sincere gratitude and respect for the commitments you have made in this great cause. With your help and continued support, it will soon be springtime for disarmament.