

Peace and Disarmament: Opening Remarks

by

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An Evening of Dialogue on the United Nations and Its Common Purposes

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I know that it is customary for speakers to thank their hosts, and I will make no exception to this rule today. I do indeed wish to express my appreciation to the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and the Global Security Institute, for sponsoring this event. Yet I wish to go a step further, and thank them also for the noble work they are doing in pursuit of a better world. Better, not just in the way we have grown accustomed to viewing this term—namely, in terms of our own immediate material interests—but better in bringing humanity closer together in a spirit of community and common cause.

The topic of our event today—peace and disarmament—is of course one that has already been the focus of many formidable dissertations, many elaborate disquisitions, and even a few inquisitions. This is not at all surprising, given the complexity of each of these subjects—and the complexity of each is exceeded only by the complexity of the relationship between them. Is peace a prerequisite for disarmament, or is incremental progress in disarmament indispensable for peace? Is peace just the absence of war, or is it instead a consequence of some other event or condition?

I cannot hope to offer any confident conclusions to such questions in my short remarks today, but I do wish to offer some thoughts that I hope will serve as a basis for advancing a dialogue—as our sponsors have suggested—a dialogue on advancing universally recognized values to enhance the common purposes of the United Nations.

Frankly, I cannot think of a better place to begin such a dialogue than by recalling some of the broader themes found in the preambles of three great multilateral instruments.

First, the Constitution of UNESCO declares that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defenses of peace must be constructed”—now I know that this language is gender-biased, though I am sure that there are many feminists in our audience tonight who would nonetheless welcome any progress their male colleagues could make in this particular area. Less often quoted are the clauses citing the “ignorance of each other’s ways and lives” as being a source of suspicion and mistrust between peoples, which has all too often broken into war. The preamble goes on to stress the importance of the “the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace,” and for basing that peace not just on political or economic arrangements, but upon “the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.” The message here is that we, the peoples of the world, must do more to achieve mutual understanding, or as this preamble concludes, a “more perfect knowledge of each other’s lives.”

The second preamble is found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and it is no less inspiring. It identifies the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, as existing in a global recognition of “the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” This preamble envisions a world in which all human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want—a world that protects human rights through the rule of law and the development of friendly relations between nations.

The third preamble is of course the UN Charter, in which the *peoples* of the United Nations declare their common determination to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war—as well as to advance human rights, to establish conditions in which international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom. The peoples of the United Nations also declared their determination “to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours,” “to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security,” to ensure that armed force shall not be used “save in the common interest,” and to employ international machinery to promote the social and economic advancement of all peoples.

We are all aware that the high standards and principles found in these preambles are, one might say, “works in progress”—there are undoubtedly gaps between aspiration and performance, theory and practice, and vision and reality. Yet however short humanity may have fallen in achieving these great goals, they remain tremendously important compass points for navigating the treacherous terrain of international relations in our current age. Some may argue that these goals are simply too ambitious, including the specific goal of global nuclear disarmament.

I do not share that view and would agree instead with what Dag Hammarskjöld said in his 1960 report to the General Assembly on the work of the UN organization, just a year before his death: “It is my firm conviction,” he wrote, “that any result bought at the price of a compromise with the principles and ideals of the Organization, either by yielding to force, by disregard of injustice, by neglect of common interests or by contempt for human rights, is bought at too high a price.”

For the purposes of our dialogue this evening, I would like to make the argument that the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction is one such goal that must not be compromised. There is just no question whatsoever that disarmament is a fundamental goal of the United Nations. It is found twice in the UN Charter and was the subject of the General Assembly’s first resolution, which was adopted in London in January 1946. The UN has been pursuing the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, and the regulation and limitation of conventional armaments literally throughout its existence. The General Assembly has adopted hundreds of resolutions on these subjects, which have also been the focus of efforts throughout the UN disarmament machinery over several decades. Disarmament efforts have been underway in the UN for so long that it has become part of the very identity of this organization.

Since our dialogue today is focused on peace and disarmament, I would like to recall what President John Kennedy had to say on this subject, in his historic speech to the General Assembly in 1961—again with an unintended gender perspective that was common in his time:

Men no longer debate whether armaments are a symptom or a cause of tension. The mere existence of modern weapons--ten million times more powerful than any that the world has ever seen, and only minutes away from any target on earth--is a source of horror, and discord and distrust. Men no longer maintain that disarmament must await the settlement of all disputes--for disarmament must be a part of any permanent settlement. And men may no longer pretend that the quest for disarmament is a sign of weakness--for in a spiraling arms race, a nation's security may well be shrinking even as its arms increase.

Although about 26,000 nuclear weapons reportedly remain, the world has actually accomplished quite a lot in its long effort to rid the world of all weapons of mass destruction. It has outlawed biological and chemical weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty contains a legal obligation requiring all its parties to pursue the goal of global nuclear disarmament. We have witnessed a steady decline in the estimated size of the world's nuclear arsenals from a peak Cold War level of over 70,000 to about a third of that level. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has been signed and may enter into force in the next few years. Various states have declared that they have retired specific types of nuclear weapons, halted production of fissile material for weapons, and closed down nuclear test sites. There has also grown, over the years, what many are calling a "nuclear taboo"—namely, a powerful normative constraint against any future use of such weapons, a phenomenon meticulously documented by Professor Nina Tannenwald of Brown University.

Of course the existence of such taboos against the use of especially deadly weapons actually dates back far earlier than the nuclear age. In his long dissenting opinion in the International Court of Justice's famous Advisory Opinion on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, Judge Weeramantry recalled a normative standard dating back some 2,500 years to the ancient Sanskrit epic, the *Ramayana*.

He offered the following summary. In the course of a war between Rama and Ravana—rulers respectively in India and Sri Lanka—"a weapon of war become available to Rama's half-brother, Lakshmana, which could 'destroy the entire race of the enemy, including those who could not bear arms.' Rama advised Lakshmana that the weapon could not be used in war 'because such devastation *en masse* was forbidden by the ancient laws of war, even though Ravana was fighting an unjust war with an unrighteous motive.'" The story is all the more interesting given that this taboo was itself "ancient" even 2,500 years ago.

The challenge of disarmament, however, is somewhat more ambitious than simply seeking to ensure that a given weapon is not actually used. At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, the states parties adopted a Final Document that reaffirmed that "the total

elimination of nuclear weapons is the only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons." This is a truly remarkable statement, for it testifies to the widespread international recognition and acknowledgment of the real limitations of the alternatives to disarmament in preventing use—including the alternatives nuclear deterrence, missile defence, the threat of pre-

emption, and the balance of power. In short, the states parties were endorsing nuclear disarmament not just because it was morally right, but also because of the utilitarian reason that it was potentially the most effective way to protect against use. Disarmament here occupies the common ground between idealism and realism—it is the right thing to do, and it works.

In light of these considerations, I have come to the conclusion that disarmament is not a mere by-product of the prior achievement of a perfectly peaceful and harmonious world, but a vital contributing factor in producing such a world. Disarmament may not alone be sufficient to produce world peace, but the elimination of world's deadliest and most indiscriminate weaponry will not just give peace a chance—as anti-war protesters have long declared—but will also give all the other great goals of the UN a chance as well, including those mentioned in the three great preambles I discussed above.

This contribution of disarmament to peace and security has long been underestimated. As international interdependence grows, and the peoples of the world come to better know one another and deepen their understanding of their shared interests and ideals, I believe prospects for achieving the goals of disarmament can and surely will improve. It stands to reason that a collective impulse for peace and disarmament is positive and uplifting—it offers the world a welcome alternative to the pessimistic and negative practice of searching for security through the endless development and production of weaponry.

I very much welcome the interest that the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns has shown for the UN's work in moving forward in this positive direction. Please accept my best wishes in all your work ahead.