

Recovering from the Disarmament Recession

by

Sergio Duarte

High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations



International Peace Institute
NEW YORK SEMINAR

Weapons of Mass Destruction:

Can the UN Build Momentum for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation?

Rye Brook, New York

1 April 2009

Let me say at the outset how grateful I am to the International Peace Institute both for organizing this event and for its excellent choice of participants—and this of course includes my fellow colleagues on this panel.

International efforts to achieve global nuclear disarmament have a long but uneven history. In some respects, this chronic pattern of soaring expectations and crushing disappointments resembles the business cycle. I sense right now that the world is finally starting to pull out of its disarmament recession. This recovery is due in no small way to a series of what might be called “stimulus packages” from some unexpected quarters.

Some of these have come in the form of opinion-editorials, such as the often-cited piece by George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn two years ago in the Wall Street Journal. Commentaries by other senior statesmen and high officials have appeared in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The governments of several states with nuclear weapons have issued official disarmament proposals, as has the European Union.

Australia and Japan have launched the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, following earlier work by the Palme, Canberra, and Blix Commissions. The UN General Assembly continues to be a fertile ground for deliberating disarmament initiatives, and has identified useful criteria for assessing their implementation. Last October, the Secretary-General offered his own five-point proposal for nuclear disarmament, stressing in particular the need to strengthen the rule of law in disarmament.

While I believe leadership at the level of national governments is most important right now—especially in those states that possess nuclear weapons—I also know that the likelihood and persistence of this leadership will depend a great deal upon the stimulus of public opinion. As in the past, this stimulus often comes from efforts within civil society, even during disarmament recessions and depressions, when it is needed most.

If I may further extend my market analogy, the people have been serving as both producers and consumers in this evolving cycle of disarmament—they have originated creative ideas on how to move forward, and they understand that ultimately each human being is the beneficiary of progress in disarmament. This is why Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has referred to a nuclear-weapon-free world as a “global public good of the highest order.”

While evidence for this rising tide of disarmament is abundant in many public arenas, great challenges remain ahead to sustain our present, creative phase of the disarmament cycle.

The first challenge is not just to prolong—but to expand—the public debate. Public discussion of disarmament issues must progressively expand to include more diverse sectors of society. The constituency of disarmament extends far beyond the peace community. Today, large sectors of society that have by and large remained rather silent about disarmament issues are

becoming more aware of how progress in this field will serve their own interests and ideals. Inside the great tent of disarmament one can find increasing numbers of lawyers, doctors, scholars, religious leaders, women's groups, environmentalists, and public officials from literally all levels of government, from specific cities to the leaders of countries. To some extent, disarmament has even become somewhat of a bridge between competing political parties. In the last US presidential election, both of the leading candidates supported the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world.

The second challenge relates to what one of my UN predecessors, Jayantha Dhanapala, used to call "sustainable disarmament." Achieving disarmament, he argued, will require more than just words, but some very specific types of deeds. Some relate to the processes of taking weapons apart, securely disposing of their components, verifying compliance, ensuring that disarmament will be irreversible, and undertaking such steps in a transparent manner.

Yet he also argued that sustaining these activities requires some institutional infrastructure and policy support mechanisms. These include domestic laws and regulations that strengthen the legal and political foundations for disarmament, as well as the establishment of domestic agencies with explicit disarmament mandates. Indeed, I view the absence of any such "disarmament agencies" in states that possess nuclear weapons as a cause of concern. Such agencies are needed to support disarmament negotiators, and to build support for disarmament in the bureaucracy, the legislatures, and the general public.

So if I may summarize my remarks thus far: disarmament needs an ever-expanding constituency base, and it needs domestic organizational and legislative support. Success in these areas will help enormously, but we will not fully be on the road to sustainable disarmament until we can confront challenges on a third dimension: the level of international organization.

I find it unfortunate, and even rather strange, that most disarmament proposals in recent years have almost studiously ignored the United Nations. This is a grave injustice to all the work that the UN has done over six decades to advance both disarmament and non-proliferation goals—including the hundreds of General Assembly resolutions, the negotiation and adoption of multilateral WMD treaties, extensive collaboration with civil society, work in educating the public, and persistent efforts to strengthen compliance with global disarmament and non-proliferation commitments. The problems posed by nuclear weapons are global in scope and so too must be the solutions. In this respect, there is no substitute for the United Nations as the world's central, universal forum for developing and maintaining legitimate multilateral norms.

I would especially like to see some closer analysis of what more the UN can do—or should be doing—in this field, and how it can overcome some persisting difficulties it has been facing. These include the chronic stalemate at the Conference on Disarmament (CD), which has been unable to commence substantive work for over a decade due to persisting differences over priorities. The CD is very close to having a consensus that would allow negotiations to begin on a fissile material treaty. Farther down the road—precisely how far is impossible to say right now—I also

hope to see formal discussions or even negotiations underway at the CD on issues relating to nuclear disarmament, security assurances, and preventing an arms race in outer space. If the political will is there, the negotiations will begin—the fate of the CD will be determined far less by its specific administrative arrangements than by the political will of its members.

With respect to the rest of the UN disarmament machinery, I have little doubt that increasing numbers of our member states will recognize the unique contributions that the UN can make, including efforts from within the Secretariat, in advancing both disarmament and non-proliferation goals. We have excellent working relationships with the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the Preparatory Commission for the CTBT Organization, and the International Atomic Energy Agency. We are actively assisting states to implement Security Council resolution 1540, aimed at strengthening their capacities to prevent the proliferation or terrorist acquisition of WMD. More generally, we offer a global forum for debate, a repository of information, an arena for the representation of interests and the voicing of ideals, and potentially an indispensable instrument for the monitoring and enforcement of solemn commitments.

Yet it is also true that we are not close to having either the mandates or resources to perform all of these responsibilities today as effectively as we could. But I believe that in time, the UN's role will expand in all these areas, simply because the world will need some central coordination and integration of the diverse global efforts in this field and the UN is the logical institution to perform such roles. Perhaps the question is best put: if not at the UN, where?

Nobody, of course, should assume that because disarmament is slowly emerging out of its long recession, its achievement will be inevitable. We are still a long way from seeing a true “boom” in disarmament—the institutions, laws, and budgets just are not yet in place to sustain such a development, and we continue to see troubling signs of re-armament or the improvement of existing arsenals. Our progress could well be reversed if countries sink once again into some old habits—like heralding the alleged security benefits in nuclear arms, developing new weapons, demanding that all proliferation and terrorist threats must first be solved before disarmament can proceed, and other such syndromes. In addition, disarmament advocates could become complacent and fail to respond to the persistent attacks by their critics.

So there is absolutely nothing inevitable about disarmament. There is no “hidden hand” guiding the world to this historical destiny. It instead requires hard work, personal and institutional learning, imagination, and a stubborn refusal to accept defeat. It is goal that promises to deliver much to humanity, yet it will also require much of humanity.

Forums such as the one we are attending today give me some encouragement that we are on the right track, heading toward a world with more booms in disarmament, and toward the day when there is never another boom from a nuclear weapon.