

The United Nations and Nuclear Disarmament

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VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

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When the great British writer, Dr. Samuel Johnson, was once told that an acquaintance had promptly re-married after the end of a long unhappy marriage, Johnson replied that this was a “triumph of hope over experience.”

Today, we will be hearing voices of *both* hope and experience. We are also meeting in an institution where hope for a better world never dies, and where experience teaches that success requires persistence, a willingness to cooperate with others, and a deep appreciation of mutual interest.

The institution of the United Nations can surely not be faulted for failing to persist in the pursuit of disarmament. It is a goal found in the UN Charter. It was specifically applied by the General Assembly in its first resolution in 1946 to “weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” It was combined by the General Assembly in 1959 with efforts to limit conventional armaments into a joint concept known as “general and complete disarmament under effective international control.” In 1978, the General Assembly agreed that this would be the UN’s “ultimate objective” in this field, and it has remained so ever since.

Having clarified these goals long ago, the various components of the UN disarmament machinery have persistently sought to identify means to achieve them. Over the years, the UN Disarmament Commission has by consensus adopted various “guidelines” on many disarmament issues. The First Committee of the General Assembly has adopted hundreds of resolutions on disarmament. And the Conference on Disarmament, and its predecessor entities, successfully negotiated several key multilateral treaties, including the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

The point of this whole effort is to establish, maintain, and strengthen global norms concerning the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction and the limitation of conventional armaments.

There has certainly been no shortage of proposals for achieving global nuclear disarmament. We have all recently seen a cascade of disarmament proposals. Some credit must of course be given to George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn for their op-eds calling for a nuclear-weapon-free world. Yet we have also seen numerous proposals offered by individual states, coalitions of states, regional organizations, and individuals and groups from civil society.

In the history of nuclear disarmament, every UN Secretary-General has endorsed this goal and offered some proposals on how it could be achieved. Trygve Lie urged against any postponing of negotiations on nuclear disarmament until other great political problems are solved, arguing that both challenges must be addressed together. Dag Hammarskjöld called disarmament a “hardy perennial” at the UN, and stressed the value of breaking disarmament problems down into their various component parts and tackling them analytically. U Thant and Perez de Cuellar called the world’s attention to the high cost of the world’s armaments and their large opportunity costs for development. While Kurt Waldheim once referred to disarmament as “perhaps the most continuous activity of the United Nations,” Boutros Boutros-Ghali stressed the need to address underlying political disputes while also pursuing the elimination of both nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. It was Kofi Annan who warned that the world was in danger of “sleepwalking” toward a nuclear disaster.

Our own Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has also had a deep personal interest in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. He came to office with more first-hand experience in working with these issues than any of his predecessors. He had previously served as Chairman of the Preparatory Commission for the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, and had also been long involved in the diplomacy aimed at the de-nuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

Although he personally has made numerous official statements on such issues, his speech of 24 October last year before the East-West Institute was devoted entirely to the subject of nuclear disarmament. In that speech, he warned that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence had become, in his words, “contagious” as more countries have come to adopt it. He stressed that a nuclear-weapon-free world would constitute a “global public good of the highest order.”

Then he went on to outline his own five-point proposal to bring the world closer to this historic goal. His proposal placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of strengthening the international rule of law as it applies to disarmament. While the world community has long stressed the vital criteria of transparency, irreversibility and verification in disarmament, he understood how each of these will require binding commitments with the force of law.

He first recalled the obligation in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty for its States parties—especially the nuclear-weapon States—to enter into negotiations on nuclear disarmament, and stated that this could focus on either a convention or a framework of agreements banning nuclear-weapons. He also called for increased research and development in the field of verification.

Second, he called on the UN Security Council to become more active in addressing nuclear disarmament issues, including the need for the nuclear-weapon States to assure non-nuclear-weapon States that they will not be the subject of the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. He urged the Council to commence discussions on nuclear disarmament, perhaps within its Military Staff Committee, and to convene a summit on nuclear disarmament. In addition, he urged the non-NPT states to undertake their own disarmament commitments.

His third measure related to the need for the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the commencement of negotiations on a fissile material treaty. He stressed the importance of nuclear-weapon-free zones—including efforts to establish such a zone in the Middle East—and urged the nuclear-weapon States to adhere to the relevant protocols to the treaties establishing such zones. He had some cautionary words on the nuclear fuel cycle, underlining that its fate will also shape prospects for nuclear disarmament, not just the future of non-proliferation and counter-terrorist efforts.

Fourth, he identified certain measures to strengthen accountability and transparency, and urged the nuclear-weapon States to provide additional details about their nuclear arsenals and the steps they are taking to eliminate them. He included a proposal for the UN Secretariat to act as a repository for information supplied by states on such steps.

Finally, and echoing some of the deeper UN themes relating to general and complete disarmament, he discussed the need for complementary measures, including the elimination of other types of weapons of mass destruction; new efforts against terrorism involving such weapons; limits on conventional arms; and new weapons bans, including of missiles and space weapons.

I believe quite strongly that the fate of the Secretary-General's initiative will be determined by the same factors of persistence, cooperation, and common interest that I identified at the outset of my remarks today. Some of this collective determination will

flow from the actions of inspired leaders of countries or collaboration among groups of states. Yet, in the end, it is the understanding and support from individuals and groups in civil society that supplies the best explanation for the sheer persistence of disarmament, not only at the United Nations, but in governments throughout the world.

This is one reason why the United Nations has been doing all it can to open its proceedings to non-governmental organizations, to make relevant information more accessible to them, and to expand the number and variety of groups that show an interest in disarmament issues. It is fair to say that there is no single organized group that does not have at least some stake in the success of disarmament—this is one reason why we call disarmament a public good. The challenge is to increase a general awareness of those stakes, improve cooperation among such groups, and not to be intimidated by the extraordinary obstacles that one often encounters whenever one tries to pursue a great and noble cause.

So I return once again full-circle to my theme of hope. It can triumph over the experience of bitter disappointments and setbacks. And without it, collective action lacks all meaning. We can achieve great progress in disarmament not simply by drawing upon the bottomless pit of fears that exist in society, but by offering a vision of a better world without nuclear weapons—a world that is safer, saner, more prosperous, and a better legacy to pass along to future generations.

President Obama has used the phrase, “audacity of hope” to underscore his own understanding of the requisites for collective action. I believe that we need this audacity of hope in the field of disarmament as well, and that the United Nations will remain the world’s common forum for nurturing this hope and sustaining it over the long common journey that lies ahead. Come—let us continue this journey today.