

Disarmament and Non-Proliferation as Instruments of International Peace and Security

By

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Seminar of the 61st Session of the Institute for High Defense Studies
The International Situation

Rome, Italy
9 February 2010

Let me say at the outset how grateful I am to Admiral Trevisani for having invited me to participate in this Seminar. I am delighted to find myself again in Rome, where I started my diplomatic service at the Brazilian Embassy to the Quirinale, almost 50 years ago. I deeply welcome this opportunity to visit this distinguished institute, in this great city, to address a subject very dear to my heart—disarmament and non-proliferation as instruments of international peace and security.

Perhaps the best way to begin would be to clarify what I mean by some of these terms and to provide some historical background—because I know I am in a country that cares a great deal about history and appreciates its importance in understanding contemporary issues. Italy has made important contributions to the study of issues related to peace and security in the United Nations and has supported, either individually or through the European Union, a number of activities of the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs in several parts of the world.

First of all, let me stress that this term “international peace and security” appears in the UN Charter as the first official purpose of the United Nations and its maintenance is the “primary responsibility” of the Security Council. The Preamble of the Charter also made it clear that one of the founding principles of the UN is “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.”

In addition, the Charter established—or strongly reinforced—other international norms relating to the use of force. It required Member States to settle their disputes by peaceful means and to refrain from the threat or use of force. And it also in various places referred to the twin tasks of “disarmament” and the “regulation of armaments.”

Yet the Charter was signed just weeks before the world knew about nuclear weapons. Some biological weapons had been used in East Asia during World War II and chemical weapons were used extensively during World War I. It is therefore not surprising that the UN General Assembly would choose as a goal of its first resolution—adopted in London on 24 January 1946—the elimination of nuclear weapons and all other “weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” Later that year, it adopted another resolution concerning the regulation of armaments.

So literally since 1947, the United Nations has simultaneously been working to prohibit and eliminate all weapons of mass destruction (WMD), while also limiting or regulating conventional arms. In 1959, the General Assembly combined these goals into the term “general and complete disarmament”—and this became the UN’s “ultimate objective” at the General Assembly’s first special session on disarmament in 1978, and remains so today.

The UN, of course, has also long been involved in seeking to prevent the global spread of WMD, through activities that together are often called “non-proliferation”. Besides the measures adopted to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to additional States - that is, “horizontal proliferation” - many Member States have specifically called attention to the need to curb “vertical proliferation”, meaning the qualitative improvement of such weapons, and “geographical proliferation”, which refers to their deployment or unfettered transit around the

world. One can find statements alluding to these challenges dating back almost as far as references to the disarmament goal.

Horizontal proliferation in particular started to get a lot more attention after the 1954 “Atoms for Peace” speech by President Eisenhower, which later led to the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency. And in 1958, the Irish delegation to the United Nations first started to promote the idea of negotiating a treaty to prevent additional States from acquiring nuclear weapons, a goal that was finally achieved in 1968 with the endorsement by the UN General Assembly of a draft text sent to it by the two co-chairmen of the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee, the representatives of the United States and the Soviet Union. This became the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has long been considered the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime. Over the 40 years since its entry into force in 1970, nearly all UN Member States have joined this treaty. One State, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, announced its withdrawal, and three other States—Israel, India and Pakistan—chose to remain non-parties.

Throughout these four decades, the United Nations has served as the treaty’s de facto secretariat. We assist the States Parties in convening their Review Conferences every five years, and the sessions of the Preparatory Committees leading up to those conferences. Though this sounds like our role is purely administrative, we also provide considerable substantive advice and assistance to States Parties during and between these events. And to the extent that the NPT has what might be called a collective “institutional memory,” it is found in the UN Secretariat.

With respect to other types of WMD, the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions were opened for signature in 1972 and 1993, also following multilateral negotiations centred in the Conference on Disarmament and its predecessor, the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament in Geneva. In 1996, negotiations on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty were also concluded in Geneva, and although it has not yet entered into force, this treaty has already gone far in establishing a multilateral norm against nuclear tests—a norm that has since been broken only by the nuclear tests announced by India, Pakistan, and the DPRK.

Again, the UN Secretariat was called upon to assist the process of concluding these conventions. We also provided various forms of assistance to States working to establish several regional nuclear-weapon-free zones, which now exist in Latin America and the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Central Asia.

For its part, the Security Council met for the first time at the level of heads of state and government in 1992 and issued a presidential statement declaring the proliferation of all WMD to be a “threat to international peace and security.” In 2004, the Council adopted Resolution 1540, which went a step further by deciding that all Member States shall have domestic laws and policies to prevent the proliferation of WMD or their acquisition by non-state actors. Through the Office for Disarmament Affairs, the UN has been working in several parts of the world to help Member States develop or improve internal legislation and national agencies, as well as assisting in building capacity to carry on those obligations.

Finally, just last September, the Council met again at the level of heads of state and government and addressed disarmament for the first time at such a summit-level meeting. This resulted in the adoption of Resolution 1887. Although focused primarily on non-proliferation issues, this Resolution was instrumental in bringing the broader question of disarmament back to the forefront of the concern of Member States within the United Nations.

I must add that this brief history of the role of the UN in advancing disarmament and non-proliferation only tells part of the full story. Other important activities have included the work of the General Assembly, as seen in its many resolutions and its three Special Sessions—all devoted to disarmament. Additional progress has been registered in the Guidelines adopted by the UN Disarmament Commission, and in the contributions made by the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, which—all together—comprise what we call the "UN disarmament machinery." Incidentally, the current President of the Advisory Board is a distinguished Italian diplomat, Ambassador Carlo Trezza, former Representative of his country to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva and a respected expert in this subject.

What this history suggests, is that the United Nations can make its greatest contributions in disarmament and non-proliferation—and thereby also to strengthening international peace and security—when its Member States share a common political will to engage in multilateral cooperation to address these goals.

Today, it is indeed possible that we could well be entering into an exciting new phase of progress in the field of disarmament. I see an emerging convergence of three historical trends. There are, first of all, signs of enlightened leadership from the states possessing nuclear weapons, especially the Russian Federation and the United States, which together possess over 95 percent of the global nuclear weapon stockpile. Both countries seem very close to a legally binding agreement to succeed the START treaty, which will permit reductions in their nuclear arsenals and hopefully point the way to further reductions in the near future.

Second, there is growing interest from throughout the diplomatic and academic communities to strengthen efforts in both disarmament and non-proliferation. Your kind invitation for me to speak on these matters is clear evidence of this interest.

And third, there is an outpouring of support from civil society. After the groundbreaking op-ed in January 2007 by four distinguished former high office holders from the United States – George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn – other former statesmen from several countries, including Italy, have published editorial pieces voicing support for nuclear disarmament. Many respected think tanks and activist groups in many countries have been contributing ideas and support to the trend toward a world free of nuclear weapons. Together, all these are creating great expectations in the world community for progress in these areas.

Whether these rising expectations will be matched by concrete achievements must of course remain to be seen, but there are grounds for cautious optimism. I already mentioned the expectation of progress in a replacement for the expired START treaty. President Obama has announced his support for the US ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty—

and for the negotiation of a verifiable treaty to ban the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons, which is supported by the overwhelming majority of the members of the Conference on Disarmament.

While not yet entering into negotiations on nuclear disarmament as required by Article VI of the NPT, China, France, and the United Kingdom have each nevertheless undertaken their own steps away from the nuclear precipice, by announcing such initiatives as closing down nuclear test sites, halting the production of fissile material for weapons, and eliminating several types of nuclear-weapon delivery systems. The Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons are preparing to participate in the 8th Review Conference next May with renewed hope to achieve balanced progress on all three pillars of that instrument—disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Countervailing developments, however, may alter the course of these positive trends in a less desirable direction. The doctrine of nuclear deterrence remains deeply entrenched as the foundation of nuclear weapon strategies of all states that possess such weapons. Various improvements or modernization programmes are underway in each of these states, in some cases encompassing both nuclear weapons and their delivery systems.

In addition, a deep divergence of views still exists among nuclear-weapon and non-nuclear-weapon States Parties to the NPT, making it difficult to predict success in the May Review Conference. Doubts about some nuclear programmes still persist. Further restrictions on activities in non-nuclear-weapon States are being advocated as essential to prevent proliferation, while the States most affected by such measures insist that new restrictions should be matched by concrete progress in nuclear disarmament. In addition, measures to prevent non-State actors from gaining access to weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, are also high on the international agenda because these risks are very real. Yet differences remain among States Parties on this priority relative to the official goals of the treaty.

And last, but not least—far, far more is being expended by the nuclear haves on maintaining or improving their nuclear weapons than in getting rid of them—and there is far more institutional support for the former than the latter, a point illustrated by the lack of disarmament agencies among such states. Ironically, even non-governmental groups in civil society are still having a hard time finding funds from private foundations for work in the field of disarmament—even despite all the attention this issue is continuing to receive throughout the world community.

All of these considerations only beg the question, what is at the root of all of the many obstacles to improvements in the fields of disarmament and non-proliferation? The answers are familiar to us all—and typically draw upon references to such factors as nationalism, pride in technological achievement, the view that nuclear weapons are a status symbol and a source of prestige and power, the bureaucratic self-interest of groups that benefit from weapons expenditures, and of course, the common misperception that the alternative of disarmament is naïve, utopian, impractical, and just plain dangerous. All these factors account for the perceived lack of political will to pursue serious negotiations on nuclear disarmament.

How are all of these hurdles to be overcome? I believe the answer is found in determined leadership at each of the three levels I mentioned above: from the nuclear-weapon states, from the world diplomatic community, and from civil society. The best argument for disarmament is not just that it is the morally right thing to do, but that it is also the most reliable way to prevent the use of these most deadly weapons. Disarmament is not undertaken as an act of philanthropy—it will occur only when it enhances security. This is precisely why the world community has insisted for so many years that disarmament agreements must satisfy rigorous standards of transparency, verification, and irreversibility, while being undertaken through binding legal commitments.

The best way to assess the risks and benefits of disarmament is not to compare them to the level of peace and security that might exist in some fantasy dream world—but instead to compare them against the risks and benefits of what are offered by the alternatives to disarmament—including a world living under the shadow of the unstable balance of terror, the threat of pre-emption, the dubious reliability of missile defence, the humanitarian and environmental effects of a nuclear war, ever-expanding military budgets even in times of great financial hardships, and predicating world peace and security upon the inviolability of export controls.

It is extraordinary to me that disarmament advocates are called naïve idealists, and those who believe that security is directly correlated with the possession of WMD are realists. The reverse is far more likely to be the case, for the disarmament advocates understand that the controls that come with disarmament offer far more real security than either the security that exists in the status quo or from the dubious offerings of some illusory “armed peace.” A world free of nuclear weapons will surely be far safer than the world we have been living in for the past 64 years since the first atom bomb was detonated.

Too many times in history have leaders sought to build peace by force of arms—only to learn that while it is easy to build a throne of bayonets, it is difficult to sit on it.

No discussion of disarmament and non-proliferation would be complete without an emphasis on the interdependency between these two approaches to strengthening international peace and security. They have been called two sides of the same coin, and that is a fair analogy, because the political realities of our time simply will not allow the adoption of a sequential approach to these issues—such as, for example, the requirement that the risk of proliferation be first eliminated outright before disarmament can proceed. I have seen a long list of other preconditions that must first be satisfied before disarmament is allegedly possible—including the end of all war, the peaceful settlement of all disputes, zero risk of both proliferation and terrorism, and the changing of the consciousness of all of humanity to a new culture of peace.

What these views ignore is how progress in disarmament itself contributes to peace and security. In his famous speech in Prague last year, President Obama referred to “America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.” Notice that he did not say he was seeking to create peace and security so that there could be a world without such weapons—he recognized that peace and security would be strengthened by progress in disarmament and non-proliferation, the two themes of our Seminar today.

Forty-nine years ago, another US President—John F. Kennedy—made a famous speech in the UN General Assembly, where he said the following:

“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 spiralling arms race, a nation's security may well be shrinking even as its arms increase.”

I could only amend these fine remarks by adding the words, “and women,” for their own leadership and determination in supporting disarmament has also been absolutely crucial.

In conclusion, I would like today to call upon you in this audience today—all of you who work in this institute, who serve in the military, or who work in the defence ministry or have an academic or professional interest in the issues related to our subject today—to bring your fine analytical skills to the great challenge of disarmament, not just because it is right, but because of the incomparable security benefits that it offers relative to its alternatives. Your expertise would add further weight to the case for progress in this area, and humanity and future generations would welcome your contributions—for as long as time.