

# The United Nations and the Future of Nuclear Disarmament

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Study Day

*Nuclear Disarmament, Non-Proliferation, and Development*

Pontifical Academy of Sciences

Vatican City

10 February 2010

I wish to begin today by thanking Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo for inviting me to speak at this Day of Study on Nuclear Disarmament, Non-Proliferation and Development. I congratulate him and his colleagues at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for recognizing the importance of this subject—a subject that has profound implications not just for the future of international peace and security, but also in many ways, for the future of our planet.

I am also grateful for the opportunity to come back to the city of Rome, where I served as a junior diplomat in the 1960's, and to the Vatican, where for the first time I came to Piazza San Pedro for the dominical blessing by His Holiness the Pope, entered the revered Basilica and contemplated the paintings on the walls of the Sistine Chapel and other treasures of sacred art.

As many observers have remarked, one of the most astonishing characteristics of our world today is the growing interdependence of peoples. This is not exactly a new development—after all, the first words of the UN Charter are “we the peoples of the United Nations”, which suggests the fundamental unity of all people, even though our individual circumstances may vary widely.

Speaking last September in the general debate of the General Assembly, Archbishop Celestino Migliore—the Holy See's Apostolic Nuncio at the United Nations—stated that “The more the interdependence of peoples increases, the more the necessity of the United Nations becomes evident.” He added that—

“The United Nations will advance toward the formation of a true family of nations to the extent that it assumes the truth of the inevitable interdependence among peoples, and to the extent that it takes up the truth about the human person, in accordance with its Charter.”

Such views are very much in line with statements by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who has often underscored the important role of the United Nations in addressing challenges that transcend national boundaries and that are common to all humanity. On 24 October 2008, he stated that “A world free of nuclear weapons would be a global public good of the highest order.”

This is a giant step forward conceptually, because it frames the issues of disarmament and non-proliferation in exactly the right light. These are not issues that merely serve the foreign policy or national security interests of some states. The benefits from progress in these fields are shared among all states—indeed, among all peoples of the United Nations, using the language of the Charter. Numerous scientific studies have been undertaken that show the humanitarian and environmental consequences of a nuclear war or a nuclear attack—though the memories of the nuclear attacks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki I think have already established those effects quite well in the minds of people everywhere.

It is somewhat ironic that our work at the United Nations in nuclear disarmament largely derives from the UN Charter, which was signed before the world even knew of the existence of nuclear weapons. The Charter did, however, refer both to “disarmament” and “the regulation of

armaments” as goals of the new UN Organization. And in January 1946, the General Assembly wasted no time in clarifying, in its first resolution, that the disarmament goal pertained to the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons adaptable to mass destruction. Soon thereafter, other resolutions identified the additional objectives of limiting and regulating conventional arms. I view these as mutually reinforcing goals and quite logical to pursue together, since even a world without weapons of mass destruction would still have to deal with insecurities and threats posed by imbalances in conventional forces, as well as other challenges arising from the development and trade of such weapons.

In short, for over six decades, the United Nations has—with remarkable consistency—adhered firmly to these closely related goals of nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control. Together, these goals are known at the United Nations as “general and complete disarmament”, which has been the UN’s “ultimate objective” ever since the General Assembly’s first special session on disarmament in 1978. The UN also assumed many roles in the multilateral effort to prevent the global proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially since the entry into force of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1970. Today, the UN Organization provides the de facto secretariat of the NPT and serves as its institutional memory.

This continuity of the UN’s fundamental goals is also reflected in the views of its Secretaries-General—quite literally, all of them. Trygve Lie stressed the compelling need for progress in disarmament, even during the difficult early years of the Cold War. Dag Hammarskjöld called disarmament a “hardy perennial” at the United Nations—and this was a half century ago. U Thant and Javier Pérez de Cuellar focused attention on costs of the nuclear arms race and wasteful military expenditures, relative to the abundance of under-funded social and economic needs worldwide—the theme of development found in the title of our present Study Day. Kurt Waldheim once said that “the United Nations cannot hope to function effectively on the basis of the Charter unless there is major progress in the field of disarmament.” Boutros Boutros-Ghali stressed the importance of peace-building and conflict resolution in the process of disarmament. Kofi Annan clarified how progress in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation were mutually reinforcing and both essential in strengthening international peace and security.

And on 24 October 2008 Ban Ki-moon offered his five-point proposal for achieving global nuclear disarmament, which he elaborated in his Action Plan announced on 8 December 2009. A common theme in his basic approach is to stress the importance of the “rule of law”—his proposals, for example, include an endorsement of the idea of pursuing a nuclear weapon convention or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments; the ratification of all the protocols to the treaties establishing regional nuclear-weapon-free zones; the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty; the negotiation of a treaty to prohibit the production of fissile material for weapons; and the consideration of other legal restraints in the field of conventional arms, missiles, and space weapons.

In this brief overview, I have of course not mentioned the hundreds of General Assembly resolutions that have been adopted over the last six decades. While non-binding, these resolutions have considerable political importance, because they help to identify common expectations within the world community about global issues where progress should be made. It is in these resolutions, for example, that we find repeated references to specific criteria that should guide the negotiation of disarmament agreements—criteria such as transparency, irreversibility, verification, and of course, binding legal commitments. I am sure that when the United States and the Russian Federation finally conclude their bilateral negotiation on a replacement for the START treaty—which may be quite soon—many in the world community will be closely examining the new treaty in light of these widely agreed criteria. This only shows the importance and relevance of the work of the General Assembly, whose deliberations and resolutions provide a common forum for the articulation of global norms and for some accountability in assessing the behaviour of states in relation to these norms.

The Security Council has made its own contributions, most notably in the field of non-proliferation. In the early years of the UN, it served as the host of UN commissions on atomic energy and on the regulation of conventional armaments. In 1992, the Council met for the first time at the level of heads of state and government, and issued a presidential statement that declared the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to be a threat to international peace and security. In 2004, the Council adopted Resolution 1540, which required all states to adopt domestic laws and regulations to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or their acquisition by non-state actors. And last September, the Council held its first historic summit to address the issue of nuclear disarmament; at that event, the Council adopted Resolution 1887, which addressed the importance of progress in both disarmament and non-proliferation.

Nobody, of course, believes that this will be the Council's last word on disarmament—I expect Member States will be encouraging the Council to address this issue again in coming years, which would be fully in accordance with the Council's mandate under the Charter to address disarmament and the regulation of armaments (Article 47). The current President of the General Assembly is organizing a thematic debate to be held next month, which will enable international experts and Member States to address global challenges in the field of disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Yet—despite all these efforts, despite the remarkable continuity of purpose among UN member states, despite all the enlightened speeches and resolutions, despite all the studies and reports of expert groups, and despite all the countless initiatives from civil society—the world still faces the harsh reality of the continued existence of reportedly over 20,000 nuclear weapons, and the perpetuation and spread of the contagious doctrine of nuclear deterrence. Nobody knows exactly how many such weapons still exist, because there is little transparency and no international verification of declared reductions.

In addition, we continue to hear claims that additional states are or may be seeking nuclear weapons, while others are allegedly pursuing the technical means to “keep open the option” of acquiring such weapons. Countries that possess nuclear weapons continue to justify the indefinite maintenance of their arsenals as essential to their security and the security of those that are covered by defence arrangements with them—commonly referred to as the “nuclear umbrella”. At the same time, they seek to impose additional restrictions on the peaceful nuclear activities of non-nuclear weapon countries as a necessary means of containing proliferation. And then there are the legitimate concerns over the nightmare that terrorists might one day acquire nuclear weapons.

If this were not troubling enough, there is a growing crisis of confidence in our world today that the favourite, old-reliable tools for dealing with these challenges are simply not up to the tasks at hand. The nuclear black market—popularized but by no means originated by the intercontinental network of Dr. A.Q. Khan—has exposed the significant limitations of export controls to solve the proliferation threat.

The discovery of a large nuclear weapons programme in Iraq after 1991 was another blow—showing the limitations both of the international safeguards system and national intelligence capabilities—and Iraq was at the time a non-nuclear-weapon State party to the NPT. Iraq pursued its weapon programme, moreover, after Israel’s pre-emptive strike on its Osirak reactor 1981, thereby illustrating the limitations of trying to solve proliferation threats by military means. Libya also pursued nuclear weapons while being an NPT party, and then there is the case of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which joined the treaty, announced its departure from it, declared its possession of nuclear weapons, and conducted two nuclear tests.

Meanwhile, the doctrine of “extended nuclear deterrence”—often associated with the “nuclear umbrella”—has expanded in scope with the enlargement of NATO. Long-range missile tests are ongoing without any legal limitations in several regions across the globe. There is no longer any prohibition in the development, deployment, or transfer of anti-ballistic missile technology, following the abrogation of the ABM Treaty.

And last year, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reported that global military expenditures were well over \$1.4 trillion—and yet the world is as insecure as ever while arms budgets continue to rise. In a message delivered to the Global Zero meeting in Paris last week, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated that “every dollar spent on weapons is one less spent on schools, life-saving medicine, or research into life-affirming technologies”—this reflects the UN’s longstanding commitment to pursuing disarmament and development together.

So, in sum, all the familiar old tools for containing the nuclear threat—export controls, intelligence, pre-emption, deterrence, missile defence, and burgeoning defence expenditures—are either not working or are widely viewed as insufficient. The world is more aware than ever of the hazards of relying exclusively on those approaches to peace and security.

And this, I believe, helps to explain why disarmament is enjoying somewhat of a renaissance these days. About the only tool not seriously tried for eliminating nuclear threats has been the elimination of the very objects that pose such threats—namely, the weapons themselves. Disarmament—which has for so long been ridiculed as utopian and impractical—turns out to be one of the most cogent, realistic, and effective responses to this global threat.

Part of the explanation for this relates to the fact that disarmament has over the years come to be understood as involving much more than simply the instant disappearance of a class of weapons. Usually, measures in this regard have involved weapons considered obsolete or of no real efficacy in real combat. Serious disarmament initiatives, by contrast, have tended to be those that incorporate multilateral standards long under development at the United Nations—including the ones I mentioned earlier: transparency, verification, irreversibility, and bindingness. Nuclear disarmament also has the great advantage of legitimacy, which derives from its pursuit of a universal norm that is indisputably fair and just: it rests on a prohibition that is fully global in scope, without any contrived attempt to sustain indefinitely a discriminatory system of have and have-not states.

This brings me to the NPT, a treaty that has often been criticized as epitomizing this type of discriminatory system. And indeed, I would have to agree that if the true *raison d'être* of the treaty is simply to freeze indefinitely the number of states with nuclear weapons, then its future will be dark indeed. Yet I view such criticisms not as suggesting a fatal flaw in the treaty, but as a reminder of the need for the States parties to work for full compliance with all the respective obligations under that treaty, including those dealing with negotiations on nuclear disarmament, along with other commitments adopted by consensus at previous review conferences. This is surely the best way to ensure the efficacy and longevity of the non-proliferation regime instituted by the NPT.

Thus, when the States parties of the NPT gather next May for their next Review Conference, I know some issues will be the source of disagreement among the States parties. Opinions will differ, for example, on several key issues, including the extent to which the States parties have fulfilled each of the three key commitments under the treaty, relating to non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

Many non-nuclear-weapon States will argue that there has not been enough disarmament, and too much interference with peaceful uses of nuclear energy and too intrusive burdens imposed upon them in the name of non-proliferation.

The nuclear-weapon States will describe all they have done to fulfil their disarmament commitments, and stress how restraints on peaceful uses of nuclear energy and strengthened safeguards will be essential for there to be further progress in disarmament.

And another group of states—consisting largely but not exclusively of Arab states and Iran—will call for immediate efforts to implement the Resolution on the Middle East, which was part of

the package deal that led to the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995, a resolution that dealt with the establishment of a zone free of weapons of destruction in that region.

If the States parties adopt inflexible positions and refuse reasonable compromises, there will of course be a genuine danger that this conference will result in another stalemate, as did the previous Review Conference in 2005. Yet if that happens, the failure will not be found in the treaty or the organization of that conference. Responsibility will rest solely with the States parties themselves.

This unfortunate result is by no means a certainty, because there are many factors at work now that may be moving the future of this conference—and the treaty itself—in a more positive direction. Judging from their recent statements and related initiatives, I believe that the leaders of all the nuclear-weapon States now understand quite well the depth and breadth of international expectations of further progress in nuclear disarmament. The conclusion of a new START treaty—coupled with an agreement to start negotiations on additional strategic arms reductions involving verified dismantlements—would help enormously in setting the favourable mood for conference deliberations. I also believe that if the growing bloc of states known as “middle powers”—from both North and South—are able to remain together in solidarity especially on the issue of nuclear disarmament, this too will help in the consensus-building process. I also hope to see a significant presence of civil society at this Review Conference, for it is vital for the public both to observe and contribute to this review process. A combination of these political forces operating from top-down, bottom-up, and outside-in can help to overcome the last and perhaps most daunting obstacle to progress—namely, the lack of political will.

I certainly cannot predict the outcome of that Review Conference. But I do believe that the UN will continue to make important contributions in shaping the future of nuclear disarmament. We—and by this I mean the Secretariat and the Member States working together in the UN disarmament machinery—together, we will do all we can to promote further progress in eliminating all weapons of mass destruction and in limiting and regulating conventional arms, consistent with our ultimate objective of general and complete disarmament. We will work to develop or to strengthen multilateral norms in these fields and to work to make them legally binding. We will continue to provide our Member States a central global arena for deliberating these issues and a forum for the representation of views from civil society. We will continue our advocacy work and efforts to promote disarmament and non-proliferation education.

I wish once again to thank the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for demonstrating its sincere interest in the issues now before us. May this Study Day take us another step forward on our common journey to a world without nuclear weapons.