

Keynote Address

***Quo Vadis Nuclear Disarmament:
Where Are We Heading?***

By

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It is always an honour for me to have the privilege of visiting Buenos Aires. But today I am all the more grateful, for the hosts of this seminar have chosen a subject—“Toward the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons”—that is very close to my heart. I have been working on this issue for many decades, and am pleased indeed to see it once again rising to the high position on the international agenda where it belongs.

I wish in particular to thank Irma Arguello both for her efforts in organizing this event, as well as for her own personal contributions in moving this field forward. She understands well the importance of education in addressing the many complex problems associated with achieving nuclear disarmament, while also working to prevent the global proliferation of nuclear weapons and the future dangers of nuclear terrorism.

If I may, I would like to begin with a reference from analytic geometry, which I readily concede is not my *métier*. Let us consider the term, “asymptote”—which refers to the curve of a line that declines endlessly toward zero, but never quite reaches it. Interestingly, the origins of this strange word come from Greece, where *asymptotos* means “not falling together.” Applied to the field of nuclear disarmament, an asymptote would take us down to very low levels of nuclear weapons, but never quite achieving the long-sought “world free of nuclear weapons.”

Of course, great tributes might still be made to this goal, but concrete achievement would always fall short of its fulfilment, if disarmament follows such a path. Many people today believe that this is essentially what is going on with the “step-by-step” approach to disarmament.

Now there is nothing inherently wrong with taking incremental steps toward a universally agreed goal. What is crucial is for these steps to be viewed not merely as progress toward a goal, but as steps in actually achieving that goal.

Critics of the step-by-step approach to disarmament often view it as a kind of game involving the rolling out of condition after condition, with the net result that disarmament becomes merely a distant vision, an ultimate objective, or the top of what has been called a “misty mountaintop.” This type of step-by-step process reminds me of a famous print by the graphic artist M.C. Escher, which depicts faceless drones stepping endlessly up a magical staircase that goes round and round only to end right back where it started.¹ In art, this type of figure is commonly called an “impossible object”—though the same phenomenon is unfortunately observed quite often in diplomacy and politics.

The use of conditions or preconditions as a kind of subterfuge for avoiding real disarmament activities is hardly new. Alva Myrdal’s 1976 book, The Game of

¹ M.C. Escher, “Ascending and Descending”, lithograph print, 1960. For an illustration, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ascending_and_Descending.jpg.

Disarmament, contains this observation about how the game was played during the Cold War:

...both sides would present proposals for disarmament agreement, of often wholesale dimensions, but would be careful to see to it that these would contain conditions which the opposite side could not accept. This is the way disarmament was, and is, continually torpedoed.”²

Today, we do not see many proposals for comprehensive approaches to disarmament, at least not along the lines of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”, which the General Assembly’s first Special Session on disarmament in 1978 established as the UN’s “ultimate objective” in this field.

Instead, we see a proliferation of preconditions for disarmament, and many indications that this game has acquired new players and some new rules, but it remains in many ways the same old game.

Proposals to defer disarmament until world peace can first be achieved fall into this category, as do calls to postpone this progress until all WMD proliferation threats can first be eliminated, all regional disputes are first settled, the risk of WMD terrorism is first reduced to zero, all dangerous WMD-related materials are first completely accounted for and placed under infallible security controls, and of course, there must also first be a solution to the problem of war. The result of—and I believe the real purpose of—all these preconditions is to postpone indefinitely the achievement of disarmament.

The same point is true with respect to those who argue that disarmament must await a fundamental transformation of human consciousness and the dawn of an entirely new society based on non-violence, and the withering away of all national militaries or even the nation state itself. Unlike the previous approach, those who favour these types of preconditions have no interest whatsoever in preserving nuclear weapons forever. They have just come to question the conclusion that incremental, step-by-step negotiations and adjustments to the current system of international security will be sufficient to produce a nuclear-weapon-free world. Their radical prescription is not based so much on utopianism or fanciful idealism, as it is on a frustrated response to “business as usual” in the ongoing game of disarmament—a game in which disarmament is honoured more with words than with concrete deeds.

Yet this is not at all the whole story of how disarmament has been addressed at the United Nations.

² Alva Myrdal, The Game of Disarmament (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 77.

Historically, the UN disarmament machinery—which consists of the UN Disarmament Commission, the General Assembly’s First Committee, and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva—has served as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining multilateral norms. Its goals are quite clear, and have been for over six decades—namely, the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biological, and chemical) and the limitation or regulation of conventional arms. But this is not all that has been achieved—a mere agreement on final goals.

This complex and ongoing multilateral process has also generated a consensus in the world community on certain standards that should apply to disarmament agreements—standards that governments and citizens everywhere should use in assessing such agreements, to judge whether they are real or not. These standards are not put forward as conditions or preconditions for disarmament to occur—they are simply criteria that enable us all to conclude with high confidence that disarmament is actually occurring.

These five standards can easily be found in literally hundreds of General Assembly resolutions and in deliberations throughout the NPT review process, including the final documents adopted at the end of the five-year Review Conferences.

The first of these standards is verification, which encompasses all the various means—both national and international—that enable States to confirm that other States are fully complying with their obligations. While unilateral declarations do have their limited roles to play in the process in disarmament—as seen in the parallel Presidential Nuclear Initiatives in 1991 involving the removal from deployment of thousands of short-range tactical nuclear weapons by the United States and the Russian Federation—such declarations cannot suffice as a means to achieve zero.

Verification is not the only standard that helps States to reassure themselves that cheating is not occurring—transparency serves a similar purpose. Both of these are confidence builders. It is very difficult to imagine how the world will ever get to zero without comprehensive, verified data on the numbers of nuclear weapons, the quantities of fissile material, and nuclear-weapon delivery systems. Transparency enables the world to witness disarmament as it is underway, and to gauge its progress in achieving elimination.

The third standard is irreversibility—this is yet another confidence-building measure the world community has agreed is important in future disarmament agreements, a measure deemed essential in avoiding strategic surprises, or sudden attempts to reverse disarmament commitments. Irreversibility underscores the need to erect formidable political and technical barriers to abandoning disarmament commitments, barriers that are reinforced by the other operating standards of verification and transparency. The goal here is not only to discourage reversals, but also to be able to detect them in time to

discourage them or to prepare collective international responses. Ideally, the goal of irreversibility is not only to make reversals unlikely, but impossible.

As important as they are, these three standards of verification, transparency, and irreversibility are still not alone sufficient to lead us to a world free of nuclear weapons.

This brings me to the fourth standard—one of universality—which holds that nuclear disarmament is not something to be undertaken only by some countries. It is instead a solemn responsibility of all countries. This certainly is true with respect to all States Parties of the NPT, who have this explicit obligation in Article VI of the Treaty. Yet it is also a theme in Security Council resolution 1887, which was adopted at the Council's high-level summit on 24 September last year. In that resolution, the Council called upon all States—not just those party to the NPT—to join in pursuing negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear arms reduction and disarmament, as well as on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control. Nuclear disarmament is widely supported in the world today because it is seen as a legitimate goal—legitimate in having been agreed upon through an open democratic process, and legitimate because of its substantive fairness in not attempting to apply a double standard.

And the last standard relates to all of the above—namely, bindingness. The world will not achieve zero based solely on toasts, press releases, or speeches about lofty mountaintops. Nuclear weapons are the most dangerous weapons on earth, so it should not be at all surprising that the world community would absolutely insist upon the strictest possible standards to establish and to maintain a nuclear-weapon free world. Treaty commitments play an indispensable role in nailing down concrete commitments, and in giving these commitments some permanence and sustainability. This is why the Secretary-General has attached such importance to the pursuit of a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of mutually-reinforcing instruments with the same goal. In this sense, the treaty ratification process is not a nuisance or an inconvenience—it is essential in ensuring that commitments are rooted both in domestic law and in strong domestic political support. Nuclear disarmament will not be achieved over the heads of the legislatures, but in partnership with the legislatures and, indeed, the public at large.

If I may now turn from analytic geometry to physics for my metaphors, there is little question that there has been some increased “momentum” in the business of disarmament over the last few years, though this is somewhat difficult to plot on any line and even more difficult to use as a basis for predicting the future.

Yet the “momentum” in physics—which focuses on the forces of objects in motion—is not quite the same as momentum in diplomacy and politics, which combines both movement with direction toward a specific destination. Many words have been written and spoken about disarmament in recent years, this is beyond question. We have

seen such words in General Assembly resolutions, Final Documents of NPT Review Conferences, national and bilateral statements by the Presidents of the States with the largest nuclear arsenals, detailed reports by respected international commissions, opinion-editorials by senior statesmen in the United States and at least a dozen additional States, and of course in a welcome growth of civil society initiatives worldwide for nuclear disarmament. I need not elaborate my evidence today, as you in this audience know what I am addressing because you have seen it too and are contributing to it.

Collectively, these words have generated increased expectations for progress. Throughout the world community—and at all levels from civil society, national governments, regional organizations, to international organizations—these rising expectations are together what is giving disarmament its new momentum. This momentum is not visible simply in the frequency of the embrace of disarmament as a distant goal, but is seen more importantly in growing demands for concrete actions to achieve it. It was not a mere coincidence that the 2010 NPT Review Conference agreed to a 64-point Action Plan addressing the treaty's key goals, including disarmament.

This new momentum has some potential to take us not just “toward” the elimination of nuclear weapons. It may well enable us actually to achieve such a goal.

Yet nobody, of course, can predict where this ongoing process will lead.

It may fade and result in incremental movement along the asymptotic downward curve that disappears over the distant horizon to every destination other than zero.

Or it may, in the worse of circumstances, be overcome by sweeping political forces that pull us toward a fully anarchic, self-help world in which each nation is compelled to believe that it has no choice other than to acquire the most vital, most essential, most indispensable weapon of national defence—which is precisely as such weapons have been described by other possessors.

Yet, in the best of circumstances, this momentum may only continue to grow, as the nuclear-weapon States do more to convince the world of their determination to fulfil their disarmament commitments, as other countries combine their efforts to pursue a world free of these weapons, and as civil society continues its dedicated efforts to sway governments and public opinion on the advantages of pursuing a nuclear-weapon-free world.

If we see disarmament agencies making their appearance in the nuclear-weapon States, see domestic laws and regulations addressing the implementation of disarmament commitments, see budgets earmarked for disarmament activities, see domestic laboratories, companies, and organizations mandated to undertake disarmament responsibilities, see evidence that weapons are actually being physically destroyed in

large numbers, and see substantial new information about the size and disposition of nuclear arsenals and their fissile materials and delivery systems in all possessor States, along with other detailed data on concrete disarmament actions—this will together be impressive evidence that the momentum for disarmament is not only continuing, but growing and moving in the right direction.

I am pleased that several of the nuclear-weapon States have in recent years published additional details about their respective arsenals. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon believes that such information is important in the wider process of strengthening accountability and transparency in implementing disarmament commitments. As part of his five-point nuclear disarmament proposal in October 2008, he invited these States to submit such information to the UN Secretariat to encourage its wider dissemination.

This idea was incorporated in Action 21 of the recommendations adopted at the 2010 NPT Review Conference, which invited the Secretary-General to establish a “publicly accessible repository” of such information. Action 21 also invited these States to adopt a “standardized reporting form” for this purpose and to agree on appropriate reporting intervals. The nuclear-weapon States will be meeting in Paris next April for their first follow-up meeting after the Review Conference, and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs is looking forward to establishing a repository on its web site for reporting this information.

So where in conclusion is nuclear disarmament heading? Will the world accept the “fewer nukes” solution offered by asymptotic disarmament policies as sufficient? Probably not—certainly no more than the nuclear-weapon States would accept partial commitments to nuclear non-proliferation. And if given the facts on the risks posed by a world without nuclear disarmament and with endless proliferation, might the last stubborn sources of resistance to disarmament start to reconsider? Maybe so, at least this would open up the possibility of achieving, as President Obama said in Prague in April 2009, the “peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

In a very real sense, the future of the world will depend in tremendously significant ways on the future of nuclear disarmament. Are the peoples and countries of the world willing to put at risk all that has been accomplished in modern times in building international interdependence, for the illusory national security benefits produced by clinging on to these obsolete, costly, and inherently dangerous weapons—weapons that are widely viewed as illegitimate and inhumane? I do not think so, and this gives me at least some hope for the future. In terms of preventing nuclear threats, there is no alternative policy that does this better than eliminating such weapons.

Nuclear disarmament therefore does indeed have a future. It is the right thing to do. And it works.