

# Achieving Global Nuclear Disarmament

By

Sergio Duarte

High Representative for Disarmament Affairs  
United Nations



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I am deeply honoured for this opportunity to speak with you today at Hunter College, but am especially grateful to learn of your specific interest in this tremendously important, yet perplexing and often frustrating subject of nuclear disarmament.

In some respects, by showing interest in disarmament, you are all following a noble tradition in your College's rich history. I am aware of your close association with the lives of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt—and they were surely not people who were afraid to take on great challenges, and I am sure neither are you, here today. Shortly before his death, Franklin Roosevelt wrote a speech for the Jefferson Day address scheduled for 13 April 1945, which ended with these lines: "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith."

This is the spirit that has motivated my own work in the field of disarmament for over four decades and this is the same spirit that I have witnessed among all dedicated proponents of this great international goal, from the individual citizen to the leaders of great nations.

This is the spirit reflected in Winston Churchill's famous speech to students at Harrow School on 29 October 1941, when he said, "Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never--in nothing, great or small, large or petty--never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense."

Disarmament advocates require this level of commitment for many reasons. First and foremost, they know that their cause is a good one—one that offers enormous benefits not just to the entire world, but also to future generations.

A good part of the motivation driving proponents of this goal relate to the unique dangers posed by these weapons. Last December, the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament—co-chaired by Australia and Japan—summarized this point with these words:

*Nuclear weapons are the most inhumane weapons ever conceived, inherently indiscriminate in those they kill and maim, and with an impact deadly for decades.*

It is this indiscriminate quality that has troubled the conscience of humanity ever since such weapons were first used in Japan in August 1945. Diplomats and international lawyers have literally for centuries sought to develop and codify global norms to limit the use of force in international relations, and one of the most fundamental principles guiding these efforts has been the universally agreed taboo

against the indiscriminate targeting of civilians in armed conflict. This is what makes the very existence of nuclear weapons so difficult to justify.

These weapons are not only indiscriminate in their devastating effects, these very effects were quite intentionally built into the creation and further development of such weapons—devastation is their *raison d'être*. The technical capability to accomplish large scale, indiscriminate destruction was why such weapons were created. They have neither lightly nor inaccurately been called “weapons of mass destruction”—this is much more than a neutral label, this term describes exactly what such weapons do.

The horrific effects of these weapons could arise in a number of different types of circumstances. Weapons could be wilfully used, even prior to use by another State—this is the whole idea behind the “first use” nuclear doctrine that remains in effect in the NATO alliance. They could also be used by accident or by miscalculation, as might happen in the event of some false alarm indicating that a nuclear attack was underway—and yes, such false alarms have happened. They could spread to other States or be used in a regional nuclear war. They could also be acquired by non-state actors and used as a weapon of nuclear terrorism.

So it is not at all difficult to demonstrate the grave risks that are posed by the very existence of nuclear weapons. Yet this is not the whole story. These weapons are also quite costly and have drained away funds that could have been used to meet basic human needs—this is what economists call “opportunity costs.” In a speech to newspaper editors on 16 April 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower explained this basic concept as follows, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

In 1999, the Brookings Institution estimated the total nuclear-weapon investments of the United States alone to be around \$5.5 trillion—or \$5.8 trillion if one includes costs of dismantling those weapons and cleaning up environmental damages at production sites.

The authors of that study knew that such a figure would be hard to visualize, so they translated it into the following images:

- If you stacked 5.8 trillion dollar bills on top of each other, your stack would go to the moon and almost all the way back, a distance of 459,000 miles.
- If \$1 was counted off every second, it would take almost 184,579 years to tally the costs of those nuclear weapons.

- If you took the \$5.5 trillion actually spent, and laid these bills end to end as bricks of \$1 bills, you would encircle the Earth at the Equator almost 105 times, making a wall more than 8.7 feet (2.7 meters) high.

Now please keep in mind that these Brookings calculations covered the expenses in just one country—and that was over a decade ago.

For another perspective on these figures, consider that the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has estimated that it would cost about \$135 billion to meet all of the UN's Millennium Development Goals—that is less than a tenth of last year's total military expenditures of \$1.6 trillion. These goals are focused on the exact opposite of mass destruction—they seek to meet basic human needs worldwide, through reducing income poverty, hunger, maternal and child mortality, disease, inadequate shelter, gender inequality, and environmental degradation.

So far today, I have focused on the risks, effects, and costs of nuclear weapons. One might have thought that these would be sufficient reasons to get rid of such weapons. And yet, they persist—which begs the question, why?

Well, there are many answers, and none of them is very satisfactory. One is that some States have come to believe that such weapons serve an important function in preventing nuclear war—possessors have reasoned that since there is no effective defence against the use of such weapons, the only way to protect against a nuclear attack is to acquire the credible capability to launch a nuclear counter-strike so devastating as to eliminate any conceivable benefit of striking first. This is the familiar doctrine of nuclear deterrence—a doctrine that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called “contagious” because of its demonstrated tendency to spread around the world, now to eight or nine countries.

Over the years, nuclear deterrence came to cover not just single states, but has also been claimed to deter nuclear threats against third countries. This is the concept of “extended deterrence” or what is often called the “nuclear umbrella.” The problems posed by this doctrine are profound.

By heralding nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantee of security, it obviously hinders progress in achieving both nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. If such weapons really do provide the security that their possessors claim they provide, why then should all States not also have the same privilege of possession, given the sovereign right of self defence? The International Commission on Nuclear Non-

Proliferation and Disarmament, mentioned earlier, addressed this point squarely as follows:

*It is neither defensible nor sustainable for some states to argue that nuclear weapons are an indispensable, legitimate and open-ended guarantor of their own and allies' security, but that others have no right to acquire them to protect their own perceived security needs.*

Yet the continued existence of nuclear weapons is not due entirely to this unfortunate doctrine. It is also perpetuated by the role of nuclear weapons as a symbol of status or prestige. Whether one considers the veto power in the UN Security Council, or the exemption of the nuclear-weapon States from the requirement of full-scope IAEA safeguards, one must admit to some truth to the claim that possession has its privileges—privileges that could well lead to envy by nuclear-weapon-deprived States. Considerations of pride, status, and prestige no doubt had at least some role to play in the acquisition of nuclear weapons by all possessor States—and these same considerations would logically and predictably serve as obstacles both to the elimination of such weapons and the prevention of their spread throughout the world.

Another formidable obstacle to disarmament is institutional in nature—and I mean this in a triple sense. First, there are no disarmament agencies in the states that possess these weapons, and this “institutional deficit” between official commitments to disarmament as a goal and the lack of institutions to implement them, constitutes a barrier to all who seek a world free of nuclear weapons. Second, there are vast institutional networks of businesses, laboratories, and government agencies that derive concrete benefits—in terms of budgets and personnel—from continued work on nuclear weapons. Third, there is nothing vaguely resembling a World Nuclear Disarmament Organization, to promote or oversee the elimination of nuclear weapons, certainly nothing comparable to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, for example.

So when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have two institutional deficits, and one institutional surplus—and their combined effect is only to further hold back progress in disarmament.

Yet I have not yet come to the biggest obstacle facing the achievement of global nuclear disarmament, and that is the challenge of creating sufficient political will to achieve this goal.

Now this term “political will” is used a lot in the disarmament and non-proliferation fields. Though it’s often used, it is seldom defined.

As I see it, political will has a lot to do with leadership. It refers to a level of commitment or determination to achieve a particular goal, combined with the means or resources to pursue it persistently over what may be a considerable period of time.

In the field of disarmament, political will is registered first of all in enlightened leadership from States that possess nuclear weapons, especially the Russian Federation and the United States, which have over 95 percent of such weapons worldwide. If these leaders and other influential officials and legislators in these States fail to understand the vital necessity for action to implement disarmament commitments, or even worse, if they perceive an advantage in preserving possession or in modernizing existing capabilities, then both disarmament and non-proliferation goals will not surprisingly prove harder to achieve.

This is, I believe, why the world reacted so positively to the historic speech by President Obama in Prague last year stating his support for nuclear disarmament—and to the joint statements made by Presidents Obama and Medvedev in recent years affirming their mutual commitment to this goal. This is also why the world has welcomed steps taken by China, France, and the United Kingdom to limit their own nuclear arsenals.

The second dimension of political will is more diplomatic in nature and is registered in the individual and collection actions by countries throughout the world community, especially the so-called “middle power” States. These States have a vital role to play in the establishment of multilateral norms of disarmament. At the United Nations, a group of middle-power States called the “New Agenda Coalition”—consisting of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, and Sweden—has clearly had an impact in developing new benchmarks for gauging progress in disarmament, as seen both in their work in the review process of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and in their annual resolutions in the General Assembly.

I would argue that civil society constitutes the third dimension of political will, and in many ways, it might ultimately turn out to be the most important, because of its potential influence on national leaders. Organized networks of individuals and groups in civil society can have enormous impacts on public policy, even in very sensitive fields. Strong and effective opposition by women’s groups and physicians to atmospheric nuclear testing played an extremely important role in the conclusion of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, as did the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which was

awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its efforts to bring about the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.

Here at Hunter College, and throughout academia, there are many opportunities to advance the great cause of nuclear disarmament. You have important contributions to make in basic research, in training people to work in this field professionally, in exploring alternative public policies, and in educating your fellow citizens.

Obviously, the best environment for achieving nuclear disarmament will exist when political will is at its strongest, and this means a convergence of all three of its dimensions—from the top down, from the bottom up, and from within the world community at large.

While we are not there yet, I am heartened that one word is being repeated over and over in the deliberations I see at the United Nations, in reference to disarmament. That word is—momentum. I think the best way to think of momentum is to view it in terms of the collective expectations of our Member States. Or more precisely, I mean a gradual or progressive increase in those expectations. Times have definitely changed from the days when former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher could refer to nuclear disarmament as “pie in the sky”. More and more States are recognizing how progress in achieving disarmament goals is not only possible and desirable, but indispensable in constructing a peaceful, secure, and prosperous world for future generations, and indeed, for ourselves.

If this momentum persists and is increased through the combined efforts of enlightened leaders from the nuclear-weapon States, the diplomatic community, and civil society, then I think we would all be quite justified in viewing the “achievement” of global nuclear disarmament not simply as a dream or “ultimate goal”, but as a practical necessity of our times, and a moral imperative.

So I will now conclude by calling on all of you here today to do what you can to contribute to this new momentum. In the pursuit of a better world, there are few contributions you could make that would benefit humanity more than the removal of the greatest threat to international peace and security.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today, and thank you once again for your interest in disarmament.