

Keynote Address

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Conference

**From Aspiration to Reality:
Nuclear Disarmament after the NPT Review**

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I know that it is customary for a keynote speaker at an event such as this to say some kind words of appreciation to the organizers. Today, however, I have no intention to participate in any empty ritual, because my admiration and respect for the organizers goes far beyond the work they have done in organizing this particular event. And I of course include here our distinguished Conference Chair—my friend and predecessor, Jayantha Dhanapala.

In arenas throughout the UN disarmament machinery—and over many years—delegation after delegation from Switzerland have stood among the world leaders in championing the cause of global nuclear disarmament. It is also fitting that we would be meeting here in Geneva, whose coat of arms contains the motto, “*Post tenebras lux*” (After the darkness, the light). I understand that this motto had its origin in the middle of the 16th century, and referred to the Reformation. Well, here we are in the 21st century, emerging in our own way from a period of great darkness, witnessing the approaching light of a newly reformed world—a world free of nuclear weapons.

As the former President of the disappointing 2005 NPT Review Conference, I can say with some authority that the consensus reached at the Review Conference five years may well portend the dawn of a new age of progress in disarmament. There is of course no historical inevitability in this, as the full transition will require persistent leadership by the nuclear-weapon States, growing cooperation by Middle Power States and other parts of the international diplomatic community, and a strong foundation of political support and active participation by individuals and groups in civil society.

With respect to the latter, the Middle Powers Initiative, a programme of the Global Security Institute, has made its own valiant contributions to this great cause, through its publications, its meetings, and advocacy work in many Middle Power States. The co-sponsorship of this conference symbolizes something that gives me hope for future progress in achieving nuclear disarmament—namely, the proven ability of States and

non-governmental organizations to work together in partnership to advance what is surely one of the most difficult but worthy objectives in the entire field of international peace and security.

Ladies and gentlemen, the title of this conference implies a process or transition. I note that the logo of the Middle Powers Initiative is the image of a bridge. Our purpose in gathering for this meeting is to explore concrete, practical steps that can help us to cross the bridge between aspiration and reality—between a nuclear-weapon-full and a nuclear-weapon-free world. We have all heard the various metaphors referring to nuclear disarmament as an invisible, misty mountaintop, as some imponderable “ultimate goal”, or perhaps most commonly, as simply a rosy “vision”.

I understand the need for an agreed goal, but I also know that the mere belief in that goal will not alone be sufficient to achieve it, nor will merely repeating that goal as a kind of mantra. It will also be fruitless to view global nuclear disarmament as something akin to predestination—an inevitable result of an unfolding historical process. To the contrary. It is a result that will only be achieved by persistent actions, which will surely be needed to overcome the countless familiar obstacles that perennially arise whenever key decisions must be made to advance disarmament.

There are the predictable obstacles from vested bureaucratic, corporate, and laboratory interests that have benefited from past investments in nuclear weapons. There will be opposition to overcome by political leaders who view nuclear weapons as some kind of militarily-useful hedge against an uncertain and dangerous future, or those who view such weapons as simply a symbol of national pride or status. And there will be those who argue that nuclear disarmament is simply unachievable, given the risks of cheating or break-out.

A brief look at the nuclear disarmament language agreed at the 2010 NPT Review Conference quickly confirms the compelling need for tangible progress—note the references to the need for “full, effective and urgent implementation” of Article VI. Note also the repeated references to terms including, “practical steps”, “concrete steps”, “significant steps”, “concrete disarmament efforts”, “concrete progress”, “special efforts”, as well as the “urgent need” for these actions.

A close reading of the “action plan” agreed for nuclear disarmament reveals some changes in emphasis on some key disarmament themes. We see some fresh, new expressions of concern over the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons”, a stance that implicitly challenges the legitimacy of the very existence of nuclear weapons given their notoriously indiscriminate effects. These “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” are intrinsic to nuclear weapons—they are precisely what such weapons were originally conceived and subsequently developed to inflict.

This theme is extremely important to emphasize and I wish in particular to salute the Government of Switzerland for its many efforts in recent years to advance it. The establishment of a global consensus that nuclear weapons are not merely dangerous, but fundamentally abhorrent to the conscience of humanity, will help enormously in strengthening the moral, legal, and political foundation for addressing all three of the grave dangers facing the world from nuclear weapons—namely, the dangers from existing arsenals, from nuclear weapons proliferation, and from nuclear terrorism.

Like many others who have read the Final Document from the 2010 NPT Review Conference, I too would like to have seen more added to it relating to disarmament, and I too regretted the omission of many constructive proposals by various delegations. I was pleased that the issue of “timelines” not only survived in the Review portion of the report, but was cited as representing the view of “a majority of States parties”. I also welcomed the two references in the Final Document to the Secretary-General’s five-point nuclear

disarmament proposal, which included the idea of considering the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments.

Though the Secretary-General's proposal also did not command a full consensus at that event, it clearly enjoys very strong support both among NPT States parties and among groups in civil society, as represented by the support it has received from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Mayors for Peace, Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (another programme of the Global Security Institute), Reaching Critical Will and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, among countless other groups worldwide. I am pleased to note that his proposal has also earned the support of national legislators—in April 2009, the Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union adopted a resolution endorsing this proposal, and it was also endorsed last April at the 3rd World Conference of Speakers of Parliament.

We have all heard the various arguments against serious consideration of the idea of a nuclear weapons convention. We're told that it's too premature, that it's impractical, that it's a distraction from the need to strengthen implementation of the NPT, and other such allegations. It is of course somewhat baffling how consideration of such an initiative—even in the hypothetical as a thought-experiment—would be considered “premature” given that global nuclear disarmament was an agreed goal in the first resolution adopted by the General Assembly in January 1946, and given the language on pursuing “negotiations in good faith” in Article VI of the NPT, which entered into force no less than 40 years ago. One can only wonder how the goal of Article VI could conceivably be achieved by means that do not have the force of law.

Let us consider here just for a moment the long-agreed the multilateral principles of “irreversibility, verifiability, and transparency” in achieving nuclear disarmament. I

cannot imagine how these can be fully satisfied without some form of binding legal commitments, whether in the form of a nuclear weapons convention, or a framework of separate mutually reinforcing instruments. My fear is that if it is somehow “too soon” even to think about or to discuss how the rule of law would ever extend into the realm of nuclear disarmament, it will also indefinitely be too soon to consider proposals to strengthen non-proliferation controls, and together these postures would hardly advance the common interest in international peace and security.

For these and many other reasons, I know that these legal measures will definitely be on the multilateral disarmament agenda from now on—they might be called a new genie that has been released from its bottle, as stubborn in its refusal to return as the genie of nuclear disarmament itself.

In conclusion, I cannot resist returning once again to old Geneva—in this case, to one of its most famous residents, Voltaire, whose eternally optimistic character, *Candide*, after experiencing the darker side of life, resolutely rejected blind optimism for his famous precept, “we must cultivate our garden.” Indeed, we who work on disarmament have a lot of cultivating to do in the years ahead, for gardens do not tend to themselves. A world without nuclear weapons is very much a work in progress—and the entire world, from individuals in civil society, from the Middle Power States and other States in the diplomatic community, to the nuclear-weapon States all have their own vitally important roles to play as gardeners.

I welcome the ideas generated by this conference—especially concerning how the United Nations can itself contribute to this process. Please, all of you, accept my best wishes as you proceed with your important work.