

**Disarmament and Non-Proliferation:
A Historical Review**

By

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Seminar on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

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I am pleased to join you today in this historic building, in the company of such distinguished authorities and old friends and colleagues, to provide some historical context for your consideration of disarmament and non-proliferation issues—both subjects very dear to my heart.

I wish in particular to thank the OAS Committee on Hemispheric Security, the Inter-American Defense College, and the OAS Secretariat for Multidimensional Security for hosting this timely and well-organized event.

My themes today are very simple—first, that the history of past efforts to control or eliminate weapons of mass destruction are important in understanding current obstacles and in constructing future initiatives to achieve such goals; and second, that regional approaches will continue to have a tremendously important role to play in advancing these global goals in the years ahead.

I would wager that many in the public believe that the term “weapons of mass destruction” was a recent invention, given the frequency of contemporary headlines addressing this issue. In fact, efforts have been underway at the global level to eliminate such weapons ever since 24 January 1946, when the UN General Assembly adopted its first resolution and devoted it to this subject. This resolution was very significant in setting a UN priority in this field. There were, after all, no references to nuclear weapons in the Charter, which was signed a few weeks before the first nuclear test in New Mexico, at a desert site the *conquistadores* had ironically called the “Jornada del Muerto”.

The resolution specifically identified the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons and what it called other “weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” These were widely understood to include chemical and biological weapons. The common denominator in agreeing on such a class of weaponry was that they are inherently indiscriminate in their effects. These weapons have certain intrinsic properties that prevent them from being exclusively against military targets, which transgresses a fundamental norm deeply embedded in the laws of war and international humanitarian law.

Reflecting language in the UN Charter that distinguishes “disarmament” from the “regulation of armaments”, the General Assembly in those early years also clarified that disarmament involved the *elimination* of weaponry, while “regulation” focused on some of the classic functions of arms control, namely, limits on numbers, production, export, and use. The distinction is very important, because literally from the start, the UN has sought not just to “regulate” WMD, but

to eliminate them outright. The goal was and remains universal and non-discriminatory in scope—in a WMD-disarmed world, there would be only “have-not” States, with no exception.

Yet at the same time, the world community also recognized the need for States to have the means to defend themselves, to police their borders, and to contribute to international peacekeeping efforts—so conventional arms would not be outlawed *per se*, but limited and regulated to serve these legitimate ends.

We should all pay tribute to the wisdom of the architects of these early efforts to deal with WMD issues, for they were aware even then that WMD disarmament and conventional arms control had to be pursued simultaneously. The whole effort was not at all intended to eliminate one type of deadly weaponry so that catastrophic wars could rage afterwards using conventional armaments. The common goal has always been to strengthen international peace and security, through both the elimination of WMD and the limitation of conventional arms.

In 1959, the General Assembly officially combined these two goals—WMD disarmament and conventional arms control—into the term “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”. And in 1978, at the General Assembly’s first Special Session on Disarmament, this was declared to be the “ultimate objective” of the United Nations in this field. This GCD goal has also been included in a dozen multilateral treaties, including both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Tlatelolco Treaty.

Yet while recognizing the importance of having a grander, comprehensive vision of GCD to serve as a framework for guiding national and multilateral efforts in this field, the world community also recognized in the early 1960s that various “partial measures” could be usefully pursued as interim measures toward that larger goal. These included—the establishment of regional nuclear-weapon-free zones; the negotiation of treaties outlawing specific WMD (chemical and biological weapons), various inhumane weapons, and military uses of weather modification; as well as prohibitions concerning deployments of WMD in non-populated areas (outer space, Antarctica, and the seabed); and limitations on nuclear testing.

With respect to nuclear weapons, the most important of these partial measures was the NPT, insofar as it outlawed the proliferation of such weapons, obliged its parties to negotiate on nuclear disarmament, and affirmed the inalienable right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

The NPT was originally negotiated between the two superpowers of the time—the United States and the Soviet Union—and it was truly a "partial measure", given that their first drafts did not address nuclear disarmament. It was only at the insistence of non-nuclear-weapon members of the old Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee—between 1966 and 1968—that a rather weak provision committing Parties to negotiations on disarmament was included in the final draft. Several members of the Eighteen Nation Committee were not satisfied with the text and there was no consensus to adopt it. Yet in 1968 the two co-Chairmen—representing the United States and the Soviet Union—sent it, on their own initiative and responsibility, to the General Assembly, which endorsed it and recommended the treaty to the signature of members of the United Nations. Several decades would pass until all members of the UN—with the exception of India, Pakistan and Israel—would sign the NPT. Later, the DPRK announced its withdrawal.

Now, it is easy to look at our world today and conclude that this practice of pursuing “partial measures” has left a lot to be desired as a means to achieve the solemn goals of GCD. The world continues to spend about \$1.5 trillion annually on military expenditures. And just look at the situation with respect to nuclear weapons. Over 20,000 such weapons remain, fully 40 years after the NPT obliged its parties to “pursue negotiations in good faith” on nuclear disarmament. Yet as of today, not one nuclear bomb or warhead has been physically eliminated as a result of a treaty obligation and disarmament negotiations have still not commenced.

Meanwhile, possessor states are continuing to develop elaborate plans to modernize such weapons or their delivery vehicles. If we consider the number States that base their security on some variation of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence—either using their own weapons or through nuclear alliance commitments—over half the world’s population lives under the shadow of the nuclear umbrella. Yet the costs of using such weapons would jeopardize the “integrity of the human species”—as stated in the preamble of the Tlatelolco Treaty.

In addition, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has still not entered into force—fifteen years after it was opened for signature—and negotiations have yet to begin on a fissile material treaty, which was part of the so-called “package deal” that led to the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. Another part of that package deal was a commitment to work for the establishment

of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East, which has only started to get the serious international attention it deserves at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

It is also troubling that so few steps have been taken to integrate nuclear disarmament commitments—including the commitment to negotiate—into domestic institutions, laws, policies, and budgets. The absence of dedicated disarmament agencies in the States that possess such weapons only gives rise to additional questions about their readiness to fulfil such commitments.

Is this therefore a time for despair? Not at all, for I have only told part of the story.

Let me ask, how many States today are touting biological or chemical weapons as the ultimate or essential means of ensuring their national security? Rather, such weapons have been successfully banned from the arsenals of virtually every State. And consider all the steps that States have taken in recent years—on their own, in fulfilment of their treaty commitments, or pursuant to their obligation under Security Council Resolution 1540—to strengthen their national controls against the proliferation of WMD to other States or to non-state actors. Non-proliferation, in short, is indeed developing an infrastructure with roots that extend to the level of domestic laws, policies, and institutions.

Consider also the fact that the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the NPT are all approaching universal membership, and the overwhelming majority of their Parties have an excellent record of compliance. Next December, the States Parties to the BWC will hold their seventh Review Conference, and States from this region will undoubtedly play an important role in promoting new progress in achieving the Convention's key goals, just as they did at the 2006 Review Conference, where they helped to set the multilateral agenda for addressing biological weapon threats. I can safely predict that they will continue their efforts to ensure that biology around the world is used safely, security, and solely for peaceful and beneficial purposes.

Consider the overwhelming support that exists in our world today—both in the General Assembly and in civil society—for efforts to begin on negotiating a nuclear weapons convention, or a framework of separate mutually-reinforcing instruments with the same objective. This has been a key initiative included in Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's nuclear disarmament proposal of 24 October 2008—an initiative that has received the support of the Inter-parliamentary Union, a World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, Mayors for Peace representing

over 4,500 cities worldwide, the Nobel Peace Laureates, countless civil society groups around the world, as well as strong expressions of support both in the General Assembly and at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Consider the growing recognition worldwide that any use of nuclear weapons would be contrary to the laws of war and international humanitarian law, a theme most recently noted in the consensus Final Document of the 2010 NPT Review Conference.

Consider one of the most extraordinary developments in the postwar era: the fact that there are today 113 States that are parties to treaties establishing regional nuclear-weapon-free zones. These States form a special kind of community, as seen in the fact that they assemble periodically to share their common experiences in implementing their respective treaties and in considering ways to promote new zones. Last May, the 2010 NPT Review Conference established a mandate for the Secretary-General—in consultation with the States in the region and the Russian Federation, United Kingdom, and United States—to organize a conference in 2012 on the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

Consider the progress that has been made by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in verifying the destruction of chemical weapons and their lethal agent materials, as well as the impressive growth of the international monitoring system administered by the Preparatory Commission of the Comprehensive Test-Ban-Treaty Organization. Indeed, there has already emerged an undeniable global taboo against the conduct of explosive tests of nuclear weapons—and the world community's universal condemnation of the two that have occurred in the last 13 years only testifies to the high level of respect that norm has earned.

We should also consider the progress that the Russian Federation and the United States have made in reducing their levels of deployed strategic nuclear weapons over the last few decades, though these reductions have remained declaratory and not subject to international verification. In the years ahead, the world will be quite justified in anticipating additional efforts not just to reduce these deployments, but to start the process of verifiably eliminating nuclear bombs and warheads—transparently and irreversibly—along with their respective delivery vehicles.

At this point, many of you may be thinking that it is not surprising that a UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs would be placing such a heavy emphasis on disarmament. I am doing so not because I believe that WMD disarmament is an end in itself, but because of the many benefits for international peace and security that will accompany progress in this area.

Just look at the challenge of halting the global proliferation of such weapons. How realistic is it, for example, to seek merely to limit the number of States possessing nuclear weapons? How can some countries forever assert an exclusive right to possess such weapons—and to use such weapons legally—while denying such possession and use to others?

It is this long-term un-sustainability of a discriminatory regime that testifies most strongly for a global prohibition. When these weapons themselves become taboo—rather than just their use—efforts to halt proliferation will stand substantially higher prospects for success, since a “zero possession” standard is non-discriminatory, fair, and legitimate, quite the opposite of the double-standard that has for so long weakened the NPT regime and prevented it from achieving a fully universal membership. With its enhanced controls, a zero-possession standard will also strengthen efforts to prevent nuclear terrorism.

While progress in disarmament is absolutely indispensable for the long-term success of non-proliferation efforts, it is of course equally true that the continued global spread of WMD will—by definition—prevent the achievement of disarmament, largely as a result of the perpetuation and spread of what Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called the “contagious” doctrine of deterrence. Progress in non-proliferation is important therefore not simply in seeking to prevent certain States from getting WMD. It is important because of its role in strengthening a global norm against the very existence of such weapons. In short, the most solid and sustainable foundation for non-proliferation rests in the illegitimacy of WMD per se, and not—as is often claimed—in measures designed to keep such weapons from “falling into the wrong hands”. These weapons are dangerous in anybody’s hands, and the longer they are possessed, modernized, and legally rationalized for use, the harder it will be to eliminate such weapons. These are just facts of life in our imperfect world.

This leads me to conclude that both disarmament and non-proliferation are needed. They are the two wheels of the bicycle that will take us to a world without nuclear weapons. They must be pursued simultaneously, not sequentially, and progress in disarmament in particular must not be forever postponed by an endless

list of preconditions, such as the insistence on the prior solution of the problem of war, the resolution of all regional disputes, or the reduction to zero of all risks of proliferation and WMD terrorism.

Peace and security are best viewed as beneficiaries of disarmament—not as preconditions for it to occur. But progress in achieving both disarmament and non-proliferation must not be taken for granted. It will require considerable effort by all States, including those that possess WMD and those that do not—working nationally, regionally, and globally. It will also require growing understanding and support from civil society. In short, it will require concrete deeds, not words alone. The resolutions, declarations, seminars, studies, domestic policies, and votes of Members of the Organization for American States are all actions that can contribute significantly to this great goal, and this applies also to expanded cooperation between Members of existing regional nuclear-weapon-free zones.

As Gabriel Garcia Marquez once wrote, “He who awaits much, can expect little.”¹

We all know that disarmament and non-proliferation have a past. It is now up to all of us to work to ensure that they also have a bright future.

¹ From *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961).