

A Global View of the WMD Environment

By

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***Promoting the Global Instruments of Nonproliferation and Disarmament:
The United Nations and the Nuclear Challenge***

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I wish at the outset to thank the Permanent Missions of Japan, Poland and Turkey to the United Nations for hosting this Conference and for inviting me to participate on behalf of Sergio Duarte, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, who is unable to attend today. I also wish to thank the Stimson Center for its assistance in organizing this event as well as the Japan society for hosting it at its premises.

Many of us are familiar with the adage, “where you stand depends on where you sit” and this applies very much to my remarks here today.

In the Office for Disarmament Affairs in the United Nations Secretariat, we view issues relating to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) fully in a global context—echoing the “global view” found in the title of this panel. This has been true throughout the 65 years that the Secretariat has been addressing issues relating to such weapons. In fact, the specific goal of eliminating these weapons was one of the original goals of the United Nations organization, dating back to the adoption of the General Assembly’s first resolution in January 1946.

As long agreed by the United Nations Member States, this mandate is as unambiguous as it is consistent: to *eliminate* WMD globally, while simultaneously seeking to *limit or regulate* conventional armaments. There is, for example, no such mandate that would just keep certain countries from obtaining WMD—to limit the deployments, numbers, or ranges of specific types of WMD—or to reduce the probability of use of such weapons. Indeed, with respect to nuclear weapons—it is their total elimination that offers the only reliable guarantee against their future use, a position long recognized by United Nations Member States as well as among the States Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

For over a half century, these combined goals of disarmament in the field of weapons of mass destruction and conventional arms control have together been called “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”—a term found in several multilateral treaties, including the NPT.

In the advice we provide to the Secretary-General, and in the assistance we offer to Member States, as well as in our engagement with civil society, these are the fundamental goals that guide our work.

Yet these are by no means our goals alone. In 1978, the first Special Session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament agreed that general and complete disarmament was the “ultimate objective” of the international community, and this approach continues to offer the most coherent and comprehensive framework for pursuing multilateral cooperation in these fields.

The usefulness of this framework is largely a function of its legitimacy—it represents goals that all UN Member States have had at least some role in deliberating, and that are substantively fair and equitable.

There is great value in having such a framework, given the bewildering complexity of daily international developments in this field. Indeed, the “global view” that has evolved over many decades of deliberations at the United Nations and in other multilateral treaty arenas, offers an indispensable means of reducing that complexity. We can best make sense of the daily deluge of events, by recalling our agreed purposes and goals.

From this perspective, I think it is indisputable that the current international environment offers many encouraging signs.

The global taboos against the use or very existence of biological and chemical weapons are holding up well and even strengthening, as best seen in the absence of States that admit to possessing such weapons, that affirm the legality of using them, or that underscore their value as an instrument of deterrence. By adopting Resolution 1540 of 2004, the Security Council established a responsibility for all States to promulgate domestic laws and regulations against the proliferation of WMD or their acquisition by non-state actors, a responsibility the Council reaffirmed in Resolution 1887 (2009). Last April, the Council adopted Resolution 1977 (2011), which extended the mandate of the 1540 Committee for an additional decade.

With respect to nuclear weapons, the recent entry into force of the New Start Treaty was definitely a step forward in limiting future deployments of strategic offensive nuclear weapons of the Russian Federation and the United States. All States that possess such weapons support the goal of eliminating them globally, and each has taken at least some constructive steps to limit their existing weapons capabilities. The de facto international moratorium on the conduct of nuclear explosive tests has also continued to hold up, notwithstanding the nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009 by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Persistent international efforts are underway to revitalize the work of the Conference on Disarmament and to take forward multilateral disarmament negotiations—this was the focus of the High Level Meeting convened by the Secretary-General last September.

While nuclear disarmament initiatives have been offered by the Secretary-General, concerned Member States, and countless groups in civil society, additional efforts have been underway to prevent the proliferation and terrorist acquisition of all types of WMD.

Yet other “trends and challenges”—the focus of our panel today—are less encouraging, especially with respect to nuclear weapons. Today, over 40 countries—representing a combined population of over half of humankind—either possess such weapons or belong to alliances that describe such weapons as essential to their security. In the last few decades, nuclear deterrence has not only persisted as a security doctrine, but it has spread to additional States. Long-term plans are in place, supported by large budgets, for the preservation or improvement of nuclear-weapons capabilities—but there are no comparable long-term plans or budgets for disarmament, nor any sign of the disarmament agencies and infrastructure needed to achieve such a goal. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has still not entered into force, 15 years after its opening for signature, and multilateral negotiations have still not begun on a fissile materials treaty, an initiative originating in the 1950s. In addition, there are today no multilateral treaties governing long-range missiles or other nuclear-weapon delivery systems, and no treaty banning the deployment of weapons in space.

There is clearly much work to do in implementing long-agreed multilateral standards in the disarmament process. In particular, improvements are needed in the realms of transparency, verification, and irreversibility—and additional efforts are needed to ensure that future disarmament commitments are fully universal and undertaken pursuant to binding legal commitments.

In fact, all of these criteria were specifically included in the Secretary-General's five-point nuclear disarmament proposal of 24 October 2008, which also voiced support for the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention or a framework of separate mutually-reinforcing instruments with the same objective.

Now it is quite clear that longstanding differences over national policies and priorities have taken a toll on the ability of the UN disarmament machinery to perform its functions. With respect to deliberations, the UN Disarmament Commission again failed to reach a consensus on substantive issues this year, and has not achieved such a goal since 1999. With respect to resolutions, the General Assembly's First Committee remains deeply divided especially on nuclear weapons issues. With respect to the negotiation of new treaties, the Conference on Disarmament remains in a stalemate, having been unable to commence substantive negotiations in the last 15 years or make progress on any of the substantive items on its agenda. I would like to underscore here that the results—or the lack thereof—in these various institutions are due to differences in State policies, not to any inherent flaw in the machinery itself. Just as we do not blame our thermometers and barometers when hot or stormy weather arrives, neither should we hold the UN disarmament machinery responsible for the chronic policy disputes that remain among its Member States.

One of the most difficult obstacles facing progress in disarmament has been a false and counter-productive debate driven by what might be called the tyranny of preconditions. We are all familiar with this syndrome. It is apparent in the old claim that peace and security must precede disarmament. It is also reflected in proposals to solve all WMD proliferation and terrorism problems first, before addressing disarmament.

Yet when it comes to WMD, the entire world now understands that the implications from the possession and use of such weapons are global in scope. Technologies and materials to produce such weapons have been found on a black market that is fully global in scope. And even a single use of nuclear weapons would have global strategic consequences.

It logically follows that efforts to address these challenges must also be global in scope, and not limited to the actions of particular coalitions of States. I would also suggest that the likelihood of achieving greater multilateral cooperation in the fields of WMD non-proliferation and counter-terrorism will be directly related to the widely recognized illegitimacy of such weapons in themselves. If they are viewed as indispensable to some, there should be no surprise that they will be viewed as indispensable to others.

This is why I continue to believe that the integrated global framework offered by the concept of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control”—which combines the elimination and regulation of certain specific armaments—offers the greatest potential for future multilateral cooperation in the years ahead. This framework recognizes that conventional arms control is not a prerequisite for WMD disarmament, but is a complimentary process supporting that goal. Significant, well-documented progress in WMD disarmament helps enormously in strengthening the legitimacy of WMD non-proliferation efforts because the aim is to eliminate such weapons outright, rather than simply to limit membership in the various clubs of their possessors.

Next year will be, in many ways, a crucial juncture for multilateral efforts to address key WMD and arms control challenges. The 2012 conference on the establishment of a zone free of WMD in the Middle East will have implications extending far beyond the region—potentially extending to the future of the NPT and international peace and security overall. There will be the first Preparatory Committee meeting for the 2015 NPT Review Conference. There will be the Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul. And there will also be a major conference to elaborate a legally binding instrument on the highest possible common international standards for the transfer of conventional arms.

Yet the business of disarmament is not simply about events, but about processes, and dedicated, cooperative action to achieve agreed multilateral goals. To the extent that national organizations, laws, policies, regulations, and budgets reflect a commitment to achieve such goals, the world has every reason to expect new progress in the years ahead. This consistency between international commitments and national practices will determine much more than the outcome of future global disarmament efforts—it will determine what kind of world we will leave behind for future generations. It is truly one of the greatest challenges of our time.