

The Conference on Disarmament: The Ghost in the Machine

By

Sergio Duarte

High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations



Breaking the Ice
Ways Ahead: Double or Quits

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I welcome this opportunity to address today a subject as important as the future of the Conference on Disarmament. Let me say, while this is a welcome event, it is also a bit sobering for me, given my early experience as a young Brazilian diplomat assigned to the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee here in Geneva, in the late 1960s.

Yes, that was a long time ago. Yet many of the challenges that have faced multilateral disarmament negotiations in subsequent years have changed very little. Stalemates in this process are hardly new. One often hears them explained as follows—that the CD is fully dependent upon the wider political environment in which it works.

There is some truth in this. But the relationship is not quite so direct. The CD and its institutional predecessors have been able to undertake productive work even during some of the complex years of the Cold War. So the mere understanding of the wider political climate does not itself guarantee anybody the ability either to prescribe solutions to the CD's problems, or to forecast what the future will hold for this venerable institution.

It is interesting that the architects of our current institutional system for developing multilateral disarmament norms would choose to describe it as “machinery”—a complex arrangement of individual machines, each performing a unique function, geared to the manufacture of a desired product—in this case, disarmament norms.

There are of course some limits to this mechanical analogy, mainly due to what might be called the “human factor”.

People can construct machines, but they are not machines themselves—though at times they can be organized into machine-like arrangements for specific purposes. The UN disarmament machinery is perhaps the closest thing the world community has to an assembly line for the establishment of multilateral disarmament norms—but it does not operate automatically and must be maintained by humans.

It is this human factor that gives this institutional machinery its capability to produce marvellous achievements, yet which can also cause it to grind to a halt.

For now, let me just call this human factor, the “ghost in the machine”.

Who, or what, is this ghost? I am referring in part to that difficult and often mentioned term, “political will” but also to something even more elusive—to a spirit that animates the deliberations that take place in this machinery—the machine of the CD in particular, because of its special role in multilateral disarmament negotiations.

At times when the Conference and its predecessors have been able to do productive work—as was apparent, for example, in its work on the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Environmental Modification Treaty, and the Seabed Treaty—these achievements

owed a lot to the spirit that inspired the evolution of a consensus among participants, a consensus embodying a shared sense of common interest that had to be pursued through cooperation, compromise, and flexible but principled diplomacy.

And at times when the Conference has been deadlocked and unable to establish any common ground, this has occurred when cooperation has given way to some very old impulses in our world—impulses of narrow nationalism, and the pursuit of immediate perceived self interests regardless of the implications for the world community overall, for humanity, and for future generations.

The human factor guiding the operations of this machinery depends heavily upon global statesmanship of individuals who comprise it, as well as upon outsiders who appreciate its goals and seek to advance them. The true statesmen of our time—which include women and men who have served as Ambassadors here in Geneva, some who have worked in their foreign ministries, and still others who have served as leaders in civil society—together, they comprise the human factor that has enabled the progressive development of multilateral disarmament norms.

When the machinery has been productive, it has owed its productivity to this ghost within—a shared spirit of compromise and conciliation, focused on the advancement of humanity and the global common interest. At such moments, the productivity of this machinery has yielded a triumph not simply of globalism—or even of multilateral accomplishment—but concrete results that also serve the interests of each State, individually. This is why “universality” has been recognized for decades as a solemn standard to use in assessing the content and likely sustainability of proposed disarmament agreements.

We are, unfortunately, in one of those historical periods where perceptions of common interests, common priorities, and common commitments to cooperation, appear to be losing focus.

There is no Cold War to hold responsible for this predicament. The UN disarmament machinery—the CD in particular—is struggling in one of those times in which even though there is widespread agreement among States on fundamental aims, there are still deep divisions among, at a minimum, some States on some key issues, most notably the means to achieve those aims.

The present situation facing the CD is especially difficult, and cannot be fairly or simplistically described as a kind of a duel between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. It is instead better viewed as a result of competing visions of the common interest, as I think has been amply demonstrated in the protracted and difficult deliberations to commence negotiations on a fissile material treaty.

The distinguished members of the CD have been unable to break this stalemate. Officials in national capitals have found no panaceas. Last September, the Secretary-General convened a High Level Meeting on this issue, and while various well informed views were voiced on that occasion, the event ended by highlighting also the many divisions that remain among the States on their priorities and policies to achieve them. Civil society groups have studied this problem and recognized the difficulties of promptly resolving it. And the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters has also been grappling with this challenge, having just concluded a session on this issue.

I must confess that, despite the magnitude of the task of revitalizing this machinery, I count myself among the cautious optimists at this historic juncture in the evolution of the CD and its role in the establishment of multilateral disarmament norms. In constructing multilateral norms that are fully global in scope, the world has learned that there are no substitutes for achieving a consensus. Just as the legitimacy of the NPT has often been criticized for having established a have/have-not regime, a similar result would face any future disarmament or non-proliferation agreements that seek to advance norms that apply only to some countries, but not to others.

The past success of the Antipersonnel Landmines Convention and the Cluster Munitions Convention I believe are due both to the fact that they seek to abolish an entire class of weaponry—whose effects are considered to be excessively harmful and indiscriminate—and to the aspiration of its promoters and participants to full universal membership in those instruments.

When we consider carefully all the many agreed multilateral standards to guide the disarmament process—including verification, irreversibility, transparency, universality, and binding commitments—it becomes difficult to conceive how these can be achieved without multilateral treaties. And this brings me back to the indispensable role played by the CD—our efforts would be best invested in reviving the CD. It is difficult to understand how its replacement with *ad hoc*, improvised arrangements applying only to certain States could favour such a revival.

Whoever will win the ongoing battle between what might be called the institutionalists and the improvisationalists, will determine much more than the fate of disarmament. They will also very much influence the future sustainability of international peace and security. These are sobering thoughts indeed, as we contemplate which ghosts will reside in the disarmament machinery of the future.

Unfortunately, there is no *deus ex machina* or simple gimmick to resolve this question conclusively. But we can all agree that UNIDIR and the Global Forum deserve credit for organizing this event today. I have little doubt that they will continue to have their own roles to play in monitoring and assessing the operation of this machinery, with its ghosts of disarmament present, and disarmament yet to come.