



First Committee Side Event on the Launching of the International Panel on Fissile Materials report, “Increasing Transparency of Nuclear Warhead and Fissile Material Stocks as a Step toward Disarmament”

**Nuclear Weapon State Transparency,
the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the United Nations**

Remarks

By

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United Nations Headquarters
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The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily of the United Nations

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The UN has been pursuing the elimination of nuclear weapons and other weapons adaptable to mass destruction since the adoption of the General Assembly’s first resolution on 24 January 1946.

Much has been achieved in the 67 years to follow—nuclear test sites have been closed, certain types of nuclear weapons have been retired, some plants in NWS for producing fissile material for use in weapons have been closed, and the total declared number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons has declined dramatically from over 70,000 reported in the mid 1980s to around 17,000 today.

Yet transparency of nuclear-weapon programmes remains very uneven, in some cases non-existent. There is a lack of precise official numbers of nuclear weapons, their delivery systems, and quantities of fissile nuclear materials. Reporting typically describes ceilings on deployed strategic nuclear forces. Among the recognized nuclear-weapon States, some report more than others, and there is essentially no transparency in the non-NPT states. These numbers are also typically provided voluntarily in the form of unilateral declarations, which lack international verification.

While decisions on degrees or levels of transparency are entirely a matter for each relevant State to make, the international community has clearly registered its expectations for greater transparency over these arsenals. This has occurred in the deliberations inside the UN disarmament machinery—especially the General Assembly’s First Committee—and it has also been a common theme at the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) sessions and Review Conferences of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Transparency is actually one of five multilateral norms that the world community has identified as standards for what qualifies as a good disarmament agreement. The other four are: verification, irreversibility, bindingness, and universality. Ideally, the best disarmament agreement embodies all five standards, and it is easy to understand why. They are all mutually reinforcing. They all serve a confidence-building role. Imagine trying to create a nuclear-weapon-free world without any one of these norms.

Transparency is indispensable in rebutting the common criticism of disarmament concerning the lack of sufficient trust and confidence to achieve a true global zero—indeed, confidence-building is the very purpose of transparency. When combined together in a

multilateral disarmament arrangement, these five multilateral norms offer powerful tools for rebutting the full gamut of common criticisms of disarmament—namely, that it is utopian, impractical, dangerous, unverifiable, and unenforceable. It is transparency that enables the preparation of a “baseline” that allows for progress in disarmament to be measured. Transparency is indispensable in ensuring accountability for fulfilling disarmament commitments.

It has long been a theme emphasized at NPT Review Conferences, and not without some controversy. There have always been concerns voiced in the NPT review process over what many parties believe is a double standard at the heart of the treaty, one that requires full transparency for the implementation of non-proliferation obligations and no comparable requirements for the nuclear-weapon States. As former UN High Representative Sergio Duarte once put it, “Any treaty that applies a full-transparency standard for most of its parties—without corresponding requirements for some of them—will inevitably encounter difficulties.” (Speech 29 October 2009 in Rio De Janeiro).

Such concerns have given rise to efforts within the NPT review process to improve the transparency of the nuclear disarmament process. Step number 9 of the “thirteen” disarmament steps agreed at the 2000 Review Conference recognized that “increased transparency” regarding both nuclear weapons and the implementation of agreements was “a voluntary confidence-building measure to support future progress on nuclear disarmament.” Step 12 called for “regular reports” on implementing nuclear disarmament commitments.

The Review Conference in 2010 also repeatedly emphasized transparency. Several of the nuclear disarmament-related parts of the 64-point Action Plan adopted at that conference addressed this issue. Action 19 even recognized a role for civil society in improving transparency. Action 20 called for regular reports on implementing the Action Plan, and Action 21 called for a “standard reporting form” and also invited the Secretary-General to establish a “publicly accessible repository” of information supplied by nuclear-weapon States. Action 5 called upon these States to report to the 2014 session of the Preparatory Committee on steps they have taken relating to nuclear disarmament, including measures taken to “enhance transparency”.

In the 2012 and 2013 sessions of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conferences, two coalitions of states presented “working papers” on transparency—the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (which emphasized the standard reporting form) and the New Agenda Coalition, which focused on transparency over highly-enriched uranium and plutonium, including production histories.

Transparency has also been addressed in several UN arenas. The First Committee of the General Assembly annually adopts three nuclear-disarmament resolutions introduced respectively by the New Agenda Coalition, Japan, and Myanmar (with co-sponsorship by many NAM countries) – and each one refers to enhanced transparency as a desired objective.

Elsewhere at the UN, transparency was a prominent theme at the 2013 deliberations of the Open-Ended Working Group on nuclear disarmament, created a year earlier by the General Assembly. This was also the case with the General Assembly’s first-ever High-Level Meeting

on nuclear disarmament held last September and in statements made during the 2013 session of the First Committee.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon included transparency in his five-point nuclear disarmament proposal announced on 24 October 2008. His fourth point called upon the nuclear-weapon States to report information about their arsenals, fissile material stocks, and disarmament achievements to the UN Secretariat. On 8 December 2009, he stated that the Secretariat could maintain that information in a registry. The Office for Disarmament Affairs has established a page on its web site for this purpose, but no such information has yet been contributed.

Over the last four years, the NWS have met four times and issued joint press releases, all of which refer to transparency and reporting as subjects of their deliberations. It is not however clear if they have reached agreement on any common standard reporting form. Differences exist among the nuclear-weapon States on transparency issues, as is apparent in the lack of detailed published information about China's nuclear-weapons programme in particular.

Conclusion

The goal of enhancing transparency has widespread and persistent support in the world community, as reflected in UN and NPT deliberations. While there has been some progress, reporting remains uneven, voluntary, not subject to any standardized format, and without international verification. The next milestone will be the 2014 NPT PrepCom, when the P5 will report on what their consultations have yielded since 2010, including on transparency. The NPT will likely remain a key arena for holding the P5 accountable for fulfilling expectations for improved transparency. Yet the NPT is not sufficient, given the existence of non-NPT states, which underscores the unique role of the UN as a forum for establishing universal norms. The UN has established a repository for nuclear disarmament data—what remains is for it to be filled.