

THE UNITED NATIONS AND DISARMAMENT: FIT FOR THE TASK?

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Delegates, colleagues, friends, it is a real pleasure to be here today with you. As Secretary-General BAN Ki-Moon said, the 70th anniversary is an opportunity to take stock of our achievements but also to look at the challenges ahead.

One of these challenges – a fundamental one - lies in the field of disarmament. As many of you know, the General Assembly's first resolution, adopted on 26 January 1946, dealt with the need to achieve the elimination of all nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and the desirability of limits on the production, trade, development, and stockpiling of conventional arms. Ever since 1959, these earliest goals have been integrated into the concept of "general and complete disarmament under effective international control", which since 1978 has been the "ultimate objective" of the United Nations in disarmament.

We have traveled a long way in these past 70 years. I am mentioning this ancient history because of its relevance to the UN's current work. While the UN is still guided by these primary mandates, we continually have to adapt them to changing political and also to changing technological conditions. The advent and widespread use of armed drones, for example, required some re-thinking about how such a weapon can and should be controlled. The same applies to lethal autonomous weapons, inter-continental conventional missiles, cyber weapons, and a host of other technologies that bright minds across the globe are assiduously investigating for potential weapons applications. Meanwhile, of course, we continue to witness what is euphemistically called the "modernization" of nuclear arsenals and their delivery systems, in literally every State that possesses such weapons.

Yet the technological changes we are witnessing do not relate exclusively to the development or improvement of weapons. They also pertain to improvements in verification measures that give the world community confidence that disarmament and non-proliferation commitments are being implemented. We are witnessing a bountiful new age of development and exploration to discover new gadgets and methodologies for detecting – even remotely – small amounts of fissile nuclear material or other WMD materials in production or storage. The Preparatory Commission of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty Organization has pioneered new methods for detecting nuclear explosions even on a very small scale and at large distances. This has shown again CTBTO's relevance and usefulness when it comes to last week's announced missile test conducted by the DPRK. The International Atomic Energy Agency and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have developed their own verification capabilities and there are certainly more to come.

So what we are seeing is a kind of horse race between the technologies of disarmament and the technologies of weaponization, with the enigmatic force of "political will" often determining who will

win that race. I say “often” because technological advancements have been known to take on a life of their own, as the institutional momentum of the “research and development process” can lead to new unintended discoveries, for purposes good or evil.

This now brings me to the relevance of the United Nations in this uncertain, dynamically changing, and risky environment.

The most important function of the UN in the field of disarmament relates to the establishment, maintenance, strengthening, and adaptation of multilateral norms. I would like to stress here that this includes the full gamut of norms ranging at one extreme from those that are legally binding – namely, treaties, Security Council decisions, and customary international law – to norms that are more political in nature, such as gentlemen’s agreements, codes of conduct, political declarations, resolutions, and other such instruments and arrangements. While non-binding, these are still intended to guide or constrain the behavior of States.

What makes the UN unique is that it is closer to universal membership than any other political organization – it has no rival as a source for the creation of global norms.

Another unique contribution of the UN concerns its role in what might be called “collective legitimization”. The decisions, resolutions, and votes in the UN establish norms that have this special quality called “legitimacy” – a term that has both a procedural and a substantive dimension.

Legitimate norms are created through a democratic process of universal participation, to the extent that each Member State – regardless of its size or level of economic or military development – has at least some voice in the elaboration of these norms.

Now, as we look around us, the world is not exactly a very orderly place these days, to put it mildly. The States with the two largest nuclear arsenals are embroiled in numerous political disputes - Ukraine, INF, Syria – while nuclear disarmament talks languish. There is chaos and anarchy in the Middle East, there are terrorist organizations like ISIS and Boko Haram, there is instability in parts of Africa, and a two-dimensional race underway in South Asia involving nuclear weapons and missile developments.

Facing such instabilities, the cynics amongst us would conclude – and have concluded – that since order cannot be imposed from without in these cases, only armed self-help offers the rational and prudent choice for States.

Unfortunately, this offers us nothing as a basis for collective action. So how can we devise a grand strategy that will lead us to a more peaceful, secure, prosperous, and just world?

Let us look at history: there numerous examples when cooperation was possible even among great rivals. Just remember all of the bilateral and multilateral agreements that were concluded during some of the most frigid decades of the Cold War. Thousands of nuclear weapons were destroyed by the US and Russia. These two States that have stood on common ground in the past, and can do so again. They must lead the way in revitalizing the nuclear disarmament process – a process that must include substantial roles by other nuclear possessor States, non-nuclear weapon States, international organizations including the UN, and, of course, civil society.

The UN must lead the way in advocating disarmament, in nudging States to “do the right thing” for us, for future generations. The agreement between the US and the Russian Federation paved the way to the elimination of 1,300 tons of Syria’s chemical weapons and related material. This shows what can be accomplished when states reach a point where they recognize how their national interests are best served by advancing global interests – in this case, the global public good of promoting a world free of nuclear weapons.

Let us build on the positive: on the steps already taken as building blocks for more action. The greatest challenge ahead is to build on the few precedents we have that point in a similar direction. This applies to the P-5 States and their obligations in the Non-Proliferation Treaty as well as to encourage those States – and large arms exporters – that have not yet signed and/or ratified the Arms Trade Treaty. Other treaties also languish: the CTBT, entering its twentieth year, is still not in force.

Advocating, nudging, even cajoling or criticizing does not always make us friends. But the UN was not created to be popular: we have an obligation to pursue the goals that are in the UN Charter, that are set by Member States. If we want to move forward, we – all of us – must dispel the myth that disarmament is just a utopian dream. This *a priori* assumption has helped to create one of the greatest obstacles facing us on the journey ahead: the disarmament “taboo”. If we can bring disarmament back down to earth as a practical and realistic way to strengthen national and international security and conserve resources to meet basic human needs, this is the road we must take without fear. It will be a long journey, but who better to travel the way than the United Nations, its independent civil service led by the Secretary-General?

Thank you.