



**The United Nations and Disarmament:  
Old Problems, New Opportunities, and Challenges Ahead**

By

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I wish at the outset to express my gratitude to Professor Barry Posen for inviting me to join you today, and also to thank Elina Hamilton for her assistance in making this event possible.

I do not honestly know whether your Security Studies Program has previously hosted a speaker from the United Nations to discuss disarmament issues, but if this is not the case, the time has surely come to do so. After all, we share so many interests in common. The issues we deal with in the Office for Disarmament Affairs very closely resemble language found on your SSP web site.

Like you, we too are interested in the dynamic interaction between technology and politics, and between the national and the international. Like you, we appreciate the importance of bringing together people with different professional backgrounds to analyse current trends and to explore possibilities for action. I strongly suspect that like us, you too are dissatisfied with the status quo. We continue to recognize the importance of international cooperation in advancing common interests. We appreciate the need for some consistency or congruence between international political or legal commitments of states and their domestic laws, regulations, policies, budgets, and institutions. And it is certainly the case that we share a mutual understanding of the importance of education in addressing disarmament and non-proliferation issues across the board.

There are of course some significant differences. I work in an inter-governmental organization, one that is very much run by its Member States—in the sense that they are the ones that establish mandates, approve budgets, and define both the limits and the potential for international cooperation in particular issue areas. We do have some independence in choosing how to advance our mandates. We make a lot of speeches both inside the UN and for the general public, which serve an advocacy function. We publish a lot. We host seminars and workshops. We assist in servicing meetings of parties to relevant multilateral treaties. We train interns and young diplomats. We work closely with delegations of our Member States and with non-governmental organizations. This is largely what we do.

Like any other organization, we exist in a wider environment that is continually changing. When I first worked for the Department for Disarmament Affairs in the late 1980's, the NGOs we dealt with were largely the peace groups. Today, we're working with a diverse network of NGOs that include environmentalists, human rights activists, religious leaders, women's groups, parliamentarians, mayors, lawyers, doctors and countless other groups. As I look at this trend, I can come to no other conclusion but to say that democracy is coming to disarmament. For those who wish to learn more of what we're doing to advance this cause at the UN, I encourage you all to visit our website at [www.un.org/disarmament](http://www.un.org/disarmament).

In the Secretariat, we are required to be dispassionate, but we are not expected to be neutral about the fundamental principles, goals, and priorities of the United Nations, including 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. Together, these are among the earliest goals of the United Nations—they can be found in the General Assembly's first resolution, adopted on 24 January 1946. Ever since 1959, these 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.

I am mentioning this ancient history because of its relevance to our current work. Though the Office for Disarmament Affairs is still guided by these primary mandates, we continually have to adapt them to changing political and technological conditions. The advent and widespread use of armed drones, for example, required some rethinking about how such a weapon can and should be controlled. The same applies to the advent of lethal autonomous weapons, inter-continental conventional missiles, cyber weapons, and a host of other technologies that bright minds across the planet 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 sensitive WMD materials in production or storage. The Preparatory Commission of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization has pioneered new methods of detecting nuclear explosions even on a very small scale and at large distances. The International Atomic Energy Agency and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have developed their own verification capabilities and there are certainly more to come.

So what we’re seeing is a kind of horse race between the technologies of disarmament and the technologies of weaponization, with this 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 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’d 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 behaviour 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 those norms.

It is also often the case that norms created through such a process also are substantively “fair”—that is, they do not promulgate double standards or confer special benefits on only some States. To be sure, we have witnessed many times how States have gone to war without the approval of the Security Council—a practice that has jeopardized this norm building process, but has by no means displaced it. As Dag Hammarskjöld once said, “Setbacks in trying to realize the ideal do not prove that the ideal is at fault.”

Now, as you read your daily news, you might have noticed that the world is not exactly a very orderly place these days, if I may put it mildly. We see the states with the two largest nuclear arsenals embroiled in numerous political disputes, most prominently in the Ukraine, as nuclear disarmament talks languish. We see signs of chaos and anarchy in the Middle East. Concerns about Iran’s nuclear activities have still not been fully resolved, despite periodic signs of limited progress. We see a two-dimensional race underway in South Asia involving nuclear weapons and missile developments. We have seen three nuclear tests by the Democratic Republic of Korea, the country’s announced departure from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and stream of missile tests.

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 cry of “*sauve qui peut*”—save yourself—certainly does not offer much by way of a grand strategy. It offers nothing as a basis for collective action. Frankly, it also hasn’t worked very well, given the fact that states are in fact employing such policies yet the world remains in turmoil. If the crises in the Middle East tell us anything, it surely must testify to the limits of military force—whether applied unilaterally or in coalitions—as a means to solve complicated political, cultural, and religious differences.

This begs the question, why should we conclude that a strategy that is both immoral and ineffective can lead us to a more peaceful, secure, prosperous, and just world?

History offers numerous examples of when cooperation was possible among even great rivals. Just look at all of the bilateral and multilateral agreements that were concluded during some of the most frigid decades of the Cold War. Nirvana on Earth has never been accepted as a precondition for disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation agreements—however much some commentators might like to use this as an excuse to postpone indefinitely the fulfilment of disarmament commitments.

I know it is risky reaching for generalizations from a particular case, but let me now take the leap. I’m sure you have noted that despite their many other disputes, the Russian Federation and the United States were successful in paving the way for the elimination of over 1,300 tons of Syria’s chemical weapons and related materials as well as its production complex—all this was also accompanied by Syria’s decision to join the Chemical Weapons Convention. 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 chemical weapons.

Yet the lesson that this bilateral cooperation led to the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons is not the end of the story. The General Assembly had long ago established what is called the "Secretary-General's Mechanism" for investigating alleged uses of chemical and biological weapons. It was this mechanism that was activated to investigate the initial claims of chemical weapons use in Syria.

I was very much part of the diplomacy that led to that investigation and I travelled twice to Damascus to advance this process. I was there during one of the most brutal attacks involving sarin in a local suburb. I could hear the sound of bombs and shells exploding a short distance from my hotel. It was at that point that disarmament for me shifted from being an abstract concept to something very relevant to the real world—I returned deeply aware of the extent that disarmament is rooted in security, both national and international.

Yes, armed conflicts continue to rage in Syria. But the removal and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons nevertheless represents a milestone in international cooperation not just between the two Great Powers, but also between international organizations. I am referring to the close cooperation between the Office for Disarmament Affairs, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the World Health Organization, and various security- and logistical-offices within our UN system. And in addition, there were also contributions from several other states in securing the relevant materials, transporting them out of the country, and disposing of them and their wastes. Hence we saw cooperation on multiple levels here that worked synergistically: unilateral assistance, bilateral cooperation, and joint activities undertaken by the inter-governmental organizations.

There was no interest by anyone to try merely to limit Syria's chemical weapons capabilities, or to deter future uses by threats of responses in kind. Those would be the typical solutions offered by cynics who thrive in assuming that horrible weapons are *faits accomplis* or permanent features of our international community. Again, let me emphasize here: the Syrian chemical weapons case offers a good example of how common action in the pursuit of a global interest can and does advance national interests. I believe that the world community's current efforts to deal with the Ebola virus offer another good example of how the national interest can be advanced through cooperation to advance international interests. Indeed, for these types of global threats, there is no substitute for such cooperation.

The great challenge ahead is to build on the few precedents we have that point in a similar direction. In the field of disarmament today, we are seeing a groundswell of interest—seen both among states and civil society alike—in what is called the humanitarian approach to disarmament.

This approach has the potential to be a real game-changer in this field. Yet it is still a mystery why it has suddenly inspired such collective action in recent years. After all, the notion that there should be some constraints in the use of force is a fundamental tenet in the international law of war, dating back to the writings of Hugo Grotius in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. And when it comes to nuclear weapons, concerns over the humanitarian consequences of using such weapons are hardly new—for nearly seven decades, the survivors (*hibakusha*) of the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been recounting their stories, leaving no doubt whatsoever as to the effects of such weapons on civilian populations.

Yet in 2010, the States Parties to the NPT concluded their Review Conference by agreeing by consensus on a final document in which the participants declared their “deep concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons”, adding that the duty of States to comply with international humanitarian law applies at all times. This contributed significantly to an international campaign led by concerned states and groups in civil society to abolish nuclear weapons on humanitarian grounds. Major international conferences were later held in Oslo, Norway and Nayarit, Mexico—and another such conference will take place in Vienna, Austria, this December.

This humanitarian theme has resonated particularly well at the General Assembly. It has pervaded statements made in the First Committee, it has found its way into General Assembly resolutions, and it was a prominent theme last year both at the General Assembly’s High-Level Meeting on nuclear disarmament and in the work of the Open-Ended Working Group on taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations.

By framing disarmament in human security terms, and by establishing its relationship to a foundation in international law that has existed for centuries, it has opened up many doors for broadening disarmament’s political constituency. In short, it is offering tools for filling the void of political will, which has long hindered progress in disarmament. This is why I have called it a potential game-changer.

Each year we are also working to strengthen the legal architecture for achieving nuclear disarmament—through our advocacy for the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the adoption of a fissile material treaty, the negotiation of a nuclear weapon convention or a framework of agreements with the same goal, the pursuit of universal membership and full compliance with the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, and the negotiation of other treaties to limit conventional arms. It is becoming clear that it is not just democracy that is coming to disarmament—so is the rule of law.

The great challenge ahead, of course, is to sustain this momentum and the opportunities to do this are unbelievably diverse. As Dag Hammarskjöld once said about disarmament, in this field, “a standstill does not exist; if you do not go forward, you do go backward.”<sup>1</sup> The very fact that this meeting on disarmament is occurring at MIT is itself a step forward, and I hope that you will put your expertise to work in developing the technical means needed to build confidence and trust in the disarmament process, rather than to design new instruments of death and destruction.

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 to reach the Promised Land. It will be a long journey, so let’s start today.

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<sup>1</sup> Press conference, 19 May 1960.