

The Secretary-General's Five-Point Plan on Nuclear Disarmament

by
Sergio Duarte

High Representative for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations



Session 6: Building Momentum

2009 Assembly of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament

United Nations Headquarters

12 October 2009

I very much welcome this opportunity to discuss the Secretary-General's five-point proposal for achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world, which he announced on 24 October last year in a major address at the United Nations hosted by the EastWest Institute.

Before I begin, however, I would like to say a few words about the context of his proposal—in particular, the context at the United Nations. I wish to take this approach since most, actually virtually all, of the various global nuclear disarmament proposals we have witnessed in recent years have barely mentioned or have entirely neglected the role of the United Nations in achieving this great goal.

It is clear that many people have forgotten that the elimination of all atomic weapons and other weapons adaptable to mass destruction is the oldest goal of the United Nations—at least insofar as it was a goal included in the General Assembly's first resolution in January 1946. Since then, the General Assembly has adopted literally hundreds of disarmament resolutions, including several that spell out specific standards or criteria for assessing progress in disarmament—standards that include, for example, the need for transparency, verification, irreversibility, and binding commitments. Today, it is hard to imagine nuclear disarmament ever being achieved without satisfying such standards.

Other parts of what we call the UN disarmament machinery have made their own contributions, including the deliberations in the UN Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, the world's single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum. Though both of these institutions have faced significant political difficulties in recent years, they have played their own roles in the broader and evolving process of building multilateral norms for disarmament. When one looks at this record, it's easy to see how disarmament is one of those great global challenges that has become linked to the very identity of the United Nations as an institution—it is part of our common cause, and has become what many, including the Secretary General, have called a “global public good.”

Historically, each Secretary-General of the United Nations has supported the goal of global nuclear disarmament. Trygve Lie stressed that disarmament negotiations should not be deferred until the other great political problems are solved first, but should go hand-in-hand with the search for political settlements. Over a half century has passed since Dag Hammarskjöld called disarmament a “hardy perennial” at the United Nations. U Thant and Javier Pérez de Cuellar pointed to the outrageous costs of the nuclear arms race and wasteful military expenditures, relative to the abundance of under-funded social and economic needs worldwide. Kurt Waldheim once described disarmament as “perhaps the most continuous activity of the United Nations” and even said that “the United Nations cannot hope to function effectively on the basis of the Charter unless there is major progress in the field of disarmament.” Boutros Boutros-Ghali emphasized

how the relentless build-up of arms aggravates political conflicts, and how peace building required progress in disarmament. Kofi Annan clarified how progress in nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation were mutually reinforcing and both essential in strengthening international peace and security.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, however, was to my knowledge the first in his office to launch a detailed proposal focusing specifically on nuclear disarmament, which was the focus of his address on 24 October last year. Demonstrating his personal commitment to this issue, he has subsequently raised this issue time and again in major international arenas and in his meetings with governmental officials and representatives of civil society. This should come as no surprise, given that he came to his office with more first-hand experience in dealing with nuclear-weapon issues than any previous Secretary-General—having been personally involved with the six-party talks for achieving a denuclearized Korean peninsula, and in promoting the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

His five-point plan is significant both for the high priority it attaches to the goal of nuclear disarmament, and for the way it pulls together various parts of the challenge into an integrated whole.

Point One of his plan focuses largely on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a timely issue indeed as the treaty's states parties prepare for the treaty's next Review Conference in 2010. He called upon the nuclear-weapon States to fulfil their obligation under Article VI of the Treaty to undertake negotiations in good faith on effective measures leading to nuclear disarmament. He said this could take the form of either a nuclear-weapons convention or a framework of separate, mutually-reinforcing instruments. Since nuclear disarmament is a global challenge, he called upon the recognized nuclear-weapon states actively to engage with other States at the Conference on Disarmament on this issue in Geneva. While welcoming progress in bilateral negotiations between the United States and the Russian Federation on nuclear reductions, he stressed the importance of verification, including the need for new investments in research and development in that field, while welcoming recent initiatives by the United Kingdom in that area.

Point Two focused upon the Security Council—an institution that under the Charter has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, as well as a mandate to prepare plans for the regulation of armaments and possible disarmament, yet which had never met at a summit level on disarmament issues. He therefore urged the Council to convene such a summit and to commence discussions specifically on the challenge of maintaining security during the disarmament process. On 24 September this year, the Security Council did in fact hold its first summit that specifically took up the issue of disarmament, in a historic meeting presided over by President Obama. In addition, the Secretary General stressed the need for unambiguous

security assurances to non-nuclear-weapon states against threats of nuclear attack. He also called on non-NPT states to freeze their own nuclear-weapon capabilities and make their own disarmament commitments.

Point Three dealt specifically with the need to strengthen the “rule of law” for disarmament. He called for early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, negotiations to begin immediately and without preconditions in the Conference on Disarmament on a fissile materials treaty, completion of the process of ratifying all the Protocols to existing regional nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties, new efforts to seek the establishment of such a zone in the Middle East, universal adherence to strengthened IAEA safeguards standards, and recognition that the nuclear fuel cycle is not just an issue with energy and non-proliferation implications, but its fate would also shape prospects for disarmament.

Point Four addressed issues relating to accountability and transparency. He called upon the nuclear-weapon states to provide the UN Secretariat with regular accounts of what they are doing to fulfil their disarmament commitments. The Secretariat, he proposed, would then serve as a kind of repository for such information and make it accessible to the public. He called on the nuclear powers to publish more information specifically about the size of their arsenals, as well as stocks of fissile material.

Point Five dealt with a wide range of what he called “complementary measures”—related areas where progress will be required. These include new progress in eliminating other types of weapons of mass destruction (chemical and biological), efforts against nuclear terrorism, limits in the production and trade of conventional arms, and new weapons bans, including over space weapons and certain types of missiles. He also endorsed the call by the international WMD Commission (often called the Blix Commission) for a “world summit on disarmament, non-proliferation, and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction.”

Now, I work at an organization that deals with chronic challenges facing the entire world community—this is not a place where one naturally expects quick and easy solutions to problems. If such solutions existed, there would be no need to bring them to the United Nations. So I expect there will be long road ahead in promoting new progress in disarmament.

I expect that one source for positive change will be enlightened leadership from governments of states that possess such weapons—by the end of the year, the world is expecting to see some significant progress in reducing the nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Russian Federation, the states that possess over 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons. There will in all likelihood be a new treaty to replace START treaty, which expires this year, and I hope this in turn will be followed by new negotiations on further cuts next year.

I wish to emphasize to this audience in particular that governmental leadership does not come only from the top, but also from other political institutions, including especially the parliaments, which have such important roles in ratifying treaties, appropriating funds to pay for disarmament-related activities, enacting relevant domestic legislation, overseeing government performance, debating relevant issues, and serving as a forum for representing the interests of the public.

I also expect that we'll see continued efforts from civil society to advance disarmament goals. And finally, I fully expect that the international diplomatic community will continue its many efforts to advance disarmament goals.

When I consider a full combination of these efforts—from within society, from within governments, and through the intergovernmental process—I do indeed find some grounds for cautious optimism for the future of disarmament.

I very much welcome the efforts of Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament to advance these great goals, and wish you all the very best in all your work.