

Resetting the Nuclear Disarmament Agenda

Mr. Secretary General of the United Nations,
Mr. Director General,

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to meet with you, with such a representative gathering. I would like to convey my greetings to the representatives of the UN member states, of the public, of the academic community, and of the media.

This very representative audience demonstrates interest in the subject of the new agenda for nuclear disarmament and in searching for multilateral cooperative approaches to this problem. Here in Geneva where one of the most important centres of UN activities is located and where the principal multilateral disarmament mechanism of the UN Disarmament Conference is working, such an approach is particularly appropriate.

I am one of those who has always been a determined supporter of the United Nations, and I believe that the global financial and economic crisis which is still very far from its end, has reminded us of the fact that in the world in which we live only multilateral approaches are effective. They will be needed not only to respond to the immediate crisis but also in order to move toward a new model of development which the world needs. Because the old model based on superprofits and hyperconsumption and on social and ecological irresponsibility, has run its course and it has become dangerous for mankind.



GCI Founding President Mikhail Gorbachev at the UN (Picture courtesy of UN PHOTO/Jean-Marc Ferré)

And the same certainly is true of the old model of security, and to an even greater extent, for the concepts and doctrines on which that model is based have become outdated and are becoming increasingly dangerous. The weapons that emerge from those doctrines are being produced, tested, improved, are becoming increasingly deadly and very often are actually used.

The militarization of international politics is the onerous legacy of the twentieth century. And as a result of militarization, instead of addressing the urgent social and economic problems, governments spend their resources on acquisition of weapons. The weapons business, with its propensity for corruption on a truly amazing scale, of which we learn increasingly often from the media, is flourishing and is continuing to ruin the economy and the society.

That is just a broad outline of a generally unsatisfactory picture. And in the forefront of this picture, in terms of the danger to mankind, are nuclear weapons. Their arsenals, the danger of their proliferation, the danger that they could be seized by terrorists, the danger of technical failure or an explosion as a result of an accident should be of enormous concern to us. I will say more. Knowing all this, we really should not sleep quietly.

In the mid-1980s a combination of extreme tensions in relations between the nuclear powers and the size of the nuclear arsenals led the world to a very dangerous point. And it was at that very dangerous moment that the leaders of the USSR and the United States were able to transcend the obstacles, the prejudice, the old stereotypes and to initiate a process of real reductions of nuclear weapons.

In 1985, in Geneva, President Reagan and I declared that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Less than a year after, in Reykjavik, we declared the need to eliminate nuclear arsenals. That was the next step. And I still value what we did in Reykjavik. Because this is when we looked beyond the horizon. And even though the path to an agreement at that time was blocked by the U.S. plans to create a global ballistic missile defence system, the movement toward that goal started. Two classes of medium range missiles were eliminated. A treaty was signed to reduce by a half, that is to say thousands of weapons, all strategic arms, and then in October 1991 we agreed on decommissioning and eliminating a large portion of tactical nuclear weapons.

We agreed on an enormous set of verification and confidence-building measures. We started military to military contacts and we started to review our military doctrines. All that we agreed at that time has by now been implemented. However, after the Soviet Union left the political scene, the movement toward nuclear disarmament stalled, despite the fact that the end of the confrontation seemed to create better conditions to accelerate that process.

In effect, what we have now in terms of reducing nuclear weapons is the result of implementing agreements that were signed at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, thousands of nuclear warheads are still in the arsenals of the nuclear powers.

The nuclear weapons are still deployed in the European continent, and the pace of nuclear arms reductions has slowed. There are new nuclear weapon powers and the problem of the proliferation of nuclear weapons has become increasingly urgent. The verification mechanisms have been weakened. Instead of the system of on-site inspections, we have seen a rather questionable idea of taking on faith the implementation of commitments on nuclear and biological weapons. Ronald Reagan's favourite Russian proverb "trust but verify" has been conveniently forgotten.

The treaty on the complete ban on nuclear tests has not come into force. The nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia still far exceed the arsenals of all other nuclear powers taken together and that makes it more difficult to get those powers involved in the process of nuclear disarmament.

There is a real threat of a new arms race and of the weaponisation of outer space.

It is only recently that we have seen signs that the leading nuclear powers are becoming aware that the current situation is intolerable. The Presidents of the United States and Russia have agreed to conclude by the end of this year, a verifiable treaty on the reduction of strategic offensive arms reduction. They also reaffirmed their commitment to Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Their joint statement also calls for a number of steps to reduce the nuclear danger, including ratification by the United States of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

Those are positive and encouraging steps. Nevertheless, we have to state frankly that there are more problems and dangers than achievements. The road to a nuclear-free world is being blocked by multiple obstacles, and if we don't want a nuclear-weapon-free world to remain "a mountain-top covered in fog", then we must talk about those obstacles very frankly and honestly.

The erroneous assessment of the events associated with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War was the main reason of the stalling of the arms control process. Those events were seen in the United States and in some other countries as victory for the West, as a green light for unilateralism instead of creating a new architecture of international security based on real cooperation, as envisioned by the Paris Charter for a new Europe signed in 1990. Attempts were made to impose on the world the monopoly leadership of the sole remaining super power and of institutions and organizations such as NATO that were inherited from the Cold War and were not reformed after its end.

The use of force, including so-called pre-emptive use of force and the threat of the use of force, which is also inadmissible under the United Nations Charter, once again were regarded as a normal way of solving problems.

Official documents call for the need for U.S. military superiority. Contempt for international law and for peaceful ways of solving disputes, contempt for the United Nations and for its Security Council became a kind of government policy.

As a result, we have seen military conflicts in Europe, something that seemed inconceivable. Instead of the walls that were torn down, we have seen dividing lines in Europe and in the world. We have seen a long-term deterioration in the Middle East. We have seen the war in Iraq and an extremely difficult situation in Afghanistan. And what is particularly important in the context of our subject, we have seen a worsening of the situation in terms of nuclear weapons proliferation.

Let me emphasize that nuclear arms proliferation is a problem that should not be seen per se, just in the context of

Iran and North Korea. The root of this problem is the non-implementation by the members of the nuclear club of the obligation under Article 6 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty: to move toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. While this situation continues there will be a continued danger of the emergence of new nuclear powers. Today, as we know, dozens of countries are technically capable of it.

Absolute security for some ultimately means insecurity for everyone else. If 5 or 10 countries are allowed to have nuclear weapons as their ultimate security guarantee, then why not 20 or 30 countries?

As we know, there are at least 40 threshold nuclear powers now. This is a question that has been repeated again and again, but repetition doesn't make it irrelevant. It is an issue that is becoming increasingly urgent. In the final analysis, we can only eliminate the nuclear danger by eliminating nuclear weapons.

But can we regard as realistic the prospect that in the end one country would remain with an arsenal of conventional weapons that would exceed the arsenals of all the other countries taken together? That is to say, that country would have absolute military superiority in the world. This is a situation, let's say very frankly, that would be an insurmountable obstacle on the way of ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

While giving credit to my colleagues, the veterans of U.S. politics - George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, and William Perry, whose article in the Wall Street Journal in 2007 reminded the world of the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, I thought it was important and necessary to put this question in a broader context.

If we do not address the need to demilitarize international politics, to reduce military budgets, to put an end to the development of new weapons, to prevent militarization of outer space - then the talk about a nuclear weapon free world will be just a lot of hot air.

Now, there is an opportunity to break the vicious cycle of the past few years and to start moving in the right direction. Over the past weeks we have seen serious steps and breakthroughs on the nuclear issues. The President of the United States, Barack Obama, announced changes in the U.S. plans for missile defence. This is a decision that was positively perceived by the leaders of Russia, Germany, France, and a number of other countries and by the Prime Minister of Poland.

It creates a more favourable atmosphere for nuclear arms talks, even though some issues remain. The best forum to discuss those issues would be consultations on joint assessment of missile threats, as proposed by Russia. We have seen also some positive steps in the negotiating process on the Iranian nuclear programme, and we may expect that recent contact with the People's Democratic Republic of Korea will not be fruitless.

Those are the first steps. They must be consolidated and further developed. As we move forward, there will be setbacks and disappointments, but it is clear that constructive multilateral approaches are beginning to bear fruit. In this regard, the role of the United Nations is of fundamental importance.

With all due respect for bilateral efforts of the leading nuclear powers, who are responsible for the arms race in the past, and therefore of course responsible for curbing it now, the United Nations is indispensable as regards all important issues.

I have said many times that attempts to sideline the UN and its Security Council, attempts to supplant it with other organizations and bodies such as NATO, G-8, or even the emerging G-20, should be rejected.

Incidentally, it is because of this that from the start I suggested that there should be a link between the G-20 and the United Nations by means of the G-20 submitting regular reports to the General Assembly for consideration.

Paraphrasing the words of Winston Churchill, we might say that the United Nations may be imperfect, it needs reform, but no one has been able to invent anything better, and will not be able to invent anything better, because there is no other universal world organization. And that means that it should play a more important role in disarmament issues.

The recent Security Council Summit on Nuclear Disarmament and Non-proliferation was an important step in this direction. The resolution that it adopted is a strong and balanced document that reflects the urgency of the problem and, quite properly, considers the questions of disarmament and security.

The fact that top leaders are paying attention to these issues makes it possible to expect the kind of political will that is necessary in order to overcome the selfish interests and parochialism that often derailed disarmament initiatives.

I welcome the reinvigoration of the UN Disarmament Conference and appreciate the initiatives of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, his five-point programme in particular, which is a kind of agenda both for the members of the "nuclear club" and for other countries that are capable of contributing to disarmament and demilitarization of international politics, and to creating a new security architecture.

I believe that the idea of developing a United Nations Arms Convention, similar to the conventions on prohibition and elimination of chemical and biological weapons is a promising idea. I believe that in the process of the preparation of such a convention, the United Nations could play a more mobilising role in getting a broad range of countries involved in the nuclear disarmament process and in reaching agreements.

It is within the United Nations that we should raise issues such as getting the so-called second tier nuclear powers involved in nuclear disarmament. After the United States and Russia conclude an agreement on new legally binding and verifiable major reductions of nuclear arsenals, and ratification by the United States of CTBT, this issue will become particularly relevant and important.

After that, other nuclear powers, both the official members of the nuclear club and others, must at the very least declare a freeze of their nuclear arsenals as well as their readiness to get involved in the negotiations on reductions and limitations of nuclear arms.

If those who possess the biggest arsenals of nuclear weapons start real reductions, the others will no longer be able to sit on the sidelines, hiding their arsenals from international control.

Another important and promising multilateral issue is a global ban and elimination of medium range and shorter-range missiles that the United States and Russia have eliminated. This is a dangerous, destabilizing kind of weapon that does not strengthen anyone's security.

And finally, the question of the concepts and doctrines that we inherited from the era of uncurbed nuclear arms race. This is a subject that should no longer be taboo. The discussion of the subject could be started within the framework of the Security Council's Military Staff Committee that I suggested should be revived from its comatose state in 1988 when I spoke at the UN General Assembly.

So let me summarize. Our goal should certainly be the movement toward a nuclear free, non-violent and demilitarized world where everyone is secure. I believe that this is exactly the goal that is in the interest of all countries and of all people.

But it is important at all stages of moving towards that goal that all participants be confident that their security is not being weakened, that it is not being diminished, that it is getting stronger. This is not easy to achieve, but this is the only way to go. We should move toward this goal in the context of efforts to resolve regional conflicts, to reduce conventional arms, to prevent a new arms race, whether on earth or in space, and through a combination of bilateral and multilateral efforts.

As we move further toward this goal, the importance of multilateral efforts will be growing. The United Nations is the indispensable forum for harmonizing the efforts of big and small states. It can and it must play a key role in this process.

I hope that all of you gathered here will work actively for this goal. All of us can make our own contribution. And I am sure that together we will be able to create a kind of critical mass of political will to make sure that the new nuclear disarmament agenda is translated into real and irreversible progress.

Thank you.