



**Remarks on the Role of the United Nations
in Advancing Global Disarmament Objectives**

By

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Briefing to officers of the Saudi Command and Staff College

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United Nations
New York
12 May 2014

I am very grateful to Ambassador Abdallah Al-Mouallimi not just for inviting me to speak with you today, but also for including disarmament as an issue on the agenda during your visit to the United Nations.

I have been asked to say a few words about the role of the United Nations in handling disarmament issues and in maintaining international peace and security. This will require some discussion of *what* the UN is doing, *why* we are doing it, *how* we are pursuing our official goals, and *where* in our system is this work undertaken.

Though I have spoken before on this general subject many times, it is rare that I have an opportunity to address a military audience. I regret that I have not had more such opportunities. Perhaps one reason might be that disarmament has been perceived as somehow anti-military. Well, my goal today is to correct that misperception. But to do so, I will first have to establish some historical context—and the “*why disarmament?*” question is a good place to begin.

As you know, the UN was established on the ruins of the world’s most devastating wars. It has been estimated that some 70 million people lost their lives in World War II, and over half of them were civilians. The world clearly needed some new rules and new architecture for maintaining international peace and security, and the UN Charter was signed in June 1945 largely for that specific purpose—in the words of the Charter’s Preamble, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.

Key elements of the Charter included some fundamental norms requiring the peaceful settlement of disputes, the prohibition on the threat or use of force, the advancement of social and economic development, the promotion of the rule of law and human rights, and language on “disarmament” and the “regulation of armaments”.

Unfortunately, as those last words were written, nuclear weapons had not yet even been tested, making the Charter a pre-Atomic-Age document. The nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki later alerted the world community to a need to clarify what these terms “disarmament” and “regulation of armaments” really meant.

So, on 24 January 1946, the General Assembly adopted its first resolution, which called for the elimination of nuclear weapons and other “weapons adaptable to mass destruction”. Later that year, it adopted another resolution concerning the general regulation and reduction of armaments and armed forces.

Thus, as early as 1946, the UN had already established its two most basic goals in this field: the elimination and prohibition of weapons of mass destruction, and the regulation of conventional arms. There was no intention whatsoever to eliminate all conventional arms—the Charter recognized “the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence” (Article 51). States were allowed to retain such military forces as were necessary for such purposes as maintaining borders and contributing to international peace-keeping activities.

To this day in 2014, these twin goals are not only among the earliest goals of the United Nations, they are also among the most persistent. Yes, there have of course been adaptations to these objectives. The world community has designated some conventional weapons as uniquely inhumane—like laser blinding weapons—and have adopted a treaty (the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons) to prohibit or to regulate their use. But as a rule, the UN role with respect to conventional weapons has been in the realms of limitation and regulation, rather than outright prohibitions.

When it comes to conventional arms, we recognize that the build-up of such arms in various regions represents a symptom of some underlying or unresolved disputes among the

States of these regions. Though the UN has no authority over the decisions by sovereign States with respect to these weapons, we do have certain roles to play with respect to the development of multilateral norms for conventional arms control. We offer various forums for deliberating common international standards to limit or regulate such weaponry—including controls over arms exports and reporting on military expenditures. Last year, the UN hosted a conference at which the Arms Trade Treaty was adopted, setting some standards with respect to the import, export, and transit shipments of conventional arms. In 2001, we hosted a conference that produced a “Programme of Action” to prevent the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, and have hosted several follow-up biennial meetings of States participating in that initiative, with the next one to be held at the UN next month.

In addition to our role in providing a common venue for deliberating or negotiating such norms, we also recognize that excessive secrecy can fuel arms races due to uncertainties and risk perceptions, so we have developed some transparency instruments to serve as confidence-building measures in this field. These include the UN Report on Military Expenditures—which annually contains data voluntarily supplied to the UN using a standardized reporting instrument—and the UN Register on Conventional Arms, a database of information voluntarily provided by States on their arms imports, exports, and stockpiles.

So in summary, “disarmament” refers at the UN to the elimination of WMD and “regulation of armaments” refers to conventional arms. We are not seeking here merely to “regulate” nuclear weapons, nor just to limit their use, or to preserve indefinitely a monopoly on such weapons by current possessors. There is no double-standard at the UN when it comes to “global zero” nuclear weapons—all our Member States are officially committed to pursue this goal, and as we see it here, zero means zero for all.

This explains much of what we have been doing at the UN in these fields since its establishment. While our goals have remained remarkably steady, the means of pursuing these goals have varied considerably over the years.

In the early post-war years, the UN chose to pursue a comprehensive treaty incorporating both the elimination of WMD and the limitation of conventional arms. The UN Disarmament Commission was set up in 1952 for this purpose. In 1959, the General Assembly placed on its agenda for the first time “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” (or GCD), which it later declared as the UN’s “ultimate objective” in this field. It is often forgotten that GCD has been included as a goal of a dozen multilateral treaties, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions.

It is also important to note here that GCD was never intended to mean literally no weapons of any sort, anywhere. It simply consists of the integration of WMD disarmament and conventional arms control into a common framework. This makes perfect common sense. It means that these two control activities must proceed together—simultaneously, rather than sequentially. A world suddenly without WMD would not necessarily be peaceful, given the dangers from imbalances in conventional military forces in regions around the world. This is why WMD disarmament and conventional are mutually reinforcing—they are both needed, and needed urgently, to strengthen international peace and security.

The international effort to conclude a comprehensive GCD treaty reached its peak in 1961 when the US and Soviet Union issued the McCloy-Zorin Joint Statement setting forth an outline for how GCD could be achieved. This was the basis of a historic speech in the General Assembly on this subject in September 1961 by President Kennedy.

Yet the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and further worsening of the Cold War led the world community to set aside this comprehensive approach and adopt what were called “partial measures”—these eventually included the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, treaties outlawing only some WMD (chemical and biological), regional nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties, and bilateral accords to limit deployments of strategic nuclear weapons.

These partial measures accomplished a lot. Yet over the years they have not sufficed to achieve either of the goals of GCD: especially with respect to eliminating nuclear weapons, but also with respect to limiting and regulating conventional arms, recalling that global military spending last year exceeded \$1.7 trillion. Estimated global stockpiles of nuclear weapons declined from over 70,000 in the mid-1980s to less than 20,000 today—a lower number, but still enough to destroy much of the world as we know it, and a number that reflects the stubborn persistence of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, which the Secretary-General has described as contagious. After all, if these weapons—as their possessors claim—are allegedly legal to possess and to use, amazingly effective to use for military purposes, a powerful diplomatic instrument, a source of prestige and status, and the ultimate security guarantee—on what basis can such a wonderful weapon possibly be denied every country seeking to defend its vital interests?

Remember that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which entered into force 44 years ago, required all its States Parties to undertake negotiations in good faith on nuclear disarmament—this never occurred, and now over 68 years have passed since the UN adopted the goal of global nuclear disarmament. And States currently possessing such weapons have well-funded plans to modernize them extending over many decades. Examining this record, most of our Member States are today very frustrated by the lack of greater progress in this field, a frustration that one day could well give rise to a new wave of proliferation.

This frustration is reflected in the longstanding stalemates in the UN disarmament machinery—the UN Disarmament Commission, which is supposed to deliberate guidelines and recommendations, has been unable to reach a substantive consensus since 1999. The General Assembly’s First Committee is deeply divided on virtually all resolutions dealing with nuclear weapons. And the Conference on Disarmament, the treaty negotiating body, has been unable to negotiate on any multilateral disarmament treaties since 1996.

In response to the combined failures of the comprehensive approach, the limited success of partial measures, and disappointments in the UN disarmament machinery, States today are seeking new avenues to advance the multilateral disarmament agenda. Two in particular merit our attention today.

First, the catastrophic humanitarian consequences from the use of nuclear weapons have inspired significant inter-governmental and civil-society initiatives to advance a humanitarian approach to disarmament. It focuses on an obvious conflict between the intrinsic effects of nuclear weapons and the constraints of international humanitarian law—the laws of war, which do not permit the use of indiscriminate weapons or the targeting of civilians.

Second, there is a renewed international interest in exploring the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention or an agreement on a framework of separate, mutually reinforcing instruments with the same goal, as proposed in Secretary-General’s five-point nuclear disarmament proposal of 2008. Some States and non-governmental organizations are seeking a plurilateral “ban the bomb” treaty, under which some non-nuclear-weapon States would join together to outlaw nuclear weapons even without the participation by nuclear-weapon States. These are all what I would call “works in progress”—they are initiatives that

are continuing to evolve on almost a monthly basis, but together, they testify to a great sense of dissatisfaction with past approaches, especially the familiar step-by-step process of limiting progress to various partial measures that never achieve their larger goal.

In this flurry of developments, the United Nations remains unique in many ways. Its universal membership offers each State the opportunity to participate in some way in the process of developing multilateral norms, and this helps to strengthen the legitimacy of the norms adopted in this arena. Universal participation also helps to reduce the risk of double standards or inequitable obligations—and this also helps to enhance legitimacy.

The problems we have faced in the UN disarmament machinery are entirely a reflection of deep divisions of priorities and policies of the Member States. If those differences can be bridged through diplomacy, and backed by strong support from civil society, the chronic problems in this machinery would quickly fade away.

In my talk today, I have deliberately avoided certain topics that are unique to your own region—including the status of chemical weapons in Syria, the failure to convene the NPT-mandated conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, the unresolved nuclear concerns in Iran, and Israel's nuclear capabilities. While the fate of all these issues has global implications, I understand that the greatest burden for initiative in addressing these concerns remains with the States of the region. My only point here is to underscore that the UN is doing all it can to respond to requests from this region—as indeed all regions—when assistance is sought to advance disarmament or arms control objectives.

We are organizing workshops and seminars. We are cooperating with civil society groups. We are working closely with Permanent Missions here at the UN. Our Secretary-General is speaking out on the importance, the priority, and the urgency of action in these areas. We are organizing programmes to assist in implementing non-proliferation obligations under Security Council resolution 1540, in strengthening small arms control, and in implementing the Arms Trade Treaty. We have devised strategies to promote disarmament education. And we assist in organizing and providing Secretariat services for multilateral conferences. This, in brief summary, offers you an overview of *what* we do.

In conclusion, I would like to appeal to you all, as military officers, to consider the security advantages of disarmament and conventional arms control. These are not activities that are undertaken unilaterally by States simply as gestures of charity and good will. They have the potential *not just to reduce the risk* that the world's deadliest weapons will be used, but to make any such use *impossible*. And nothing can reduce the risk of use of nuclear weapons more than nuclear disarmament.

What makes disarmament so attractive for so many millions of people worldwide is both that it aims to eliminate a certain class of weaponry that is quite literally immoral in its effects, while prudently limiting conventional arms as a way to promote regional stability and confidence-building. In other words, it is the right thing to do, and it works.

On this note, I would like to conclude not just by welcoming you to the United Nations. I welcome you to disarmament.