



INDEPENDENT COMMISSION ON MULTILATERALISM

Weapons of Mass Destruction, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament

Executive Summary

The threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) may seem antiquated and unlikely to materialize, but the mere existence of WMD remains one of the paramount threats to mankind. Nuclear weapons are the biggest existential threat, as well as the biggest gap in the multilateral disarmament and non-proliferation architecture. While many important baseline tools to counter WMD threats and prevent proliferation exist—from chemical and biological weapons conventions to monitoring, verification, and safeguard systems—few address nuclear weapons, and even fewer deal with future threats. It is within this context that this paper explores key challenges and developments in the field of non-proliferation and disarmament of WMD, with an emphasis on nuclear arms.

In theory, the UN system has a strong multilateral non-proliferation and disarmament machinery to control WMD. In practice, however, it has yielded few new normative outcomes for nearly two decades. The strict “ruling by consensus” of the Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament have resulted in gridlock. The Non-Proliferation Treaty, the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime, has proven resilient but faces numerous challenges, and other sought-after non-proliferation treaties have yet to be agreed or to enter into force. While the UN General Assembly’s First Committee has regularly adopted resolutions on WMD, these often lack the support of nuclear-weapon states, or their implementation is blocked.

Nonetheless, there have been policymaking achievements over the years, including the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological Weapons Convention, which remain landmark agreements. Moreover, several initiatives outside the UN system have sought to force movement in the UN or circumvent the UN altogether, including the Iran nuclear deal, the Humanitarian Pledge for the Prohibition and Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, President Obama’s Nuclear Security Summits, regional initiatives (e.g., nuclear-weapon-free zones), inter-organizational initiatives, and government and civil society initiatives. Many of these initiatives, however, have met with resistance from nuclear-weapon states and their allies, and few have yielded concrete results.

The debate about how to address WMD going forward is characterized by disenchantment and polarization. This debate has focused on containing and restraining possession of nuclear weapons,

while silos have made it difficult to broaden the discussion to include human rights, humanitarian consequences, transparency, and accountability. Moreover, despite a number of successful initiatives, civil society remains marginalized in debates on non-proliferation and disarmament. At the center of discussions on WMD is the question of whether certain types of weaponry can keep a country safer. Disagreement over this question has led to divisions in how to contain a nuclear arms race, how to back down from the high-alert status of nuclear weapons, what role deterrence should play in contemporary security doctrine, how to prevent the militarization of outer space, and how to address rising tensions resulting from ballistic missile defense. These disagreements, combined with a lack of inclusiveness and rigid organizational procedures, have contributed to the lack of progress on disarmament.

While the formal structures of the UN disarmament and non-proliferation machinery cannot, and should not, be replaced, they are in need of serious revitalization. This paper offers a number of recommendations for a secretary-general willing to lead an effort at revitalization:

1. **Strengthen the disarmament machinery.** The General Assembly should hold a special session to review efforts on nuclear disarmament and request a comprehensive study on nuclear weapons. In addition, the secretary-general should reinstate the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) as a UN department, request that UNODA or the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) look into the management and doctrine of nuclear weapons, and propose strengthening UNIDIR's mandate and providing core funding.
2. **Mandate UNODA in exploring ways for states to wear a cost for retaining their nuclear weapons.** The secretary-general should mandate UNODA to explore ways for nuclear-weapon states to bear a cost for retaining nuclear weapons.
3. **Support the IAEA's increasing responsibilities.** Member states should consider providing the IAEA the resources it requires. The IAEA, for its part, should hold a nuclear transportation safety and security conference and create a science and technology advisory board.
4. **Implement Security Council Resolution 1540 and other paths to innovative multilateralism.** UNODA should identify links between this resolution and WMD, and the secretary-general, through UNODA, should build on the resolution to improve the UN's image.
5. **Help assess the role of new technologies.** The UN General Assembly should mandate the secretary-general to report on new technologies and WMD. In addition, the UN, through the IAEA and implementation of Resolution 1540, could help provide affordable access to counter-proliferation technologies.
6. **Engage civil society.** The secretary-general should support NGOs in mobilizing funding through multiple sources.