The adage “where you stand depends on where you sit” aptly summarizes the state of the literature and policies on disarmament today, especially nuclear disarmament. Hence, the nuclear-weapon states and their allies defend their possession of such weapons as fully consistent with their international disarmament commitments.

Meanwhile, the non-nuclear-weapon states maintain that the “grand bargain” in the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) has not been implemented. In frustration, many in civil society, working with several governments, are promoting the newly concluded Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

One characteristic of this predicament is the entrenched nature of the positions and the lack of any sense that the protagonists are pursuing opportunities for dialogue in good faith. In terms of communication across these political lines, one finds two models: a “dialogue of the deaf” and a “dialogue of the like-minded.” In such a climate, dialogue degenerates into parallel monologues guided by the spirit of a zero-sum game regulated by a bizarre form of rules that could have come from the Marquess of Queensberry, complete with rounds, a winner and loser, and boisterous
audiences, minus a referee and prohibited punches. This has long been the case inside and outside
the UN multilateral disarmament machinery.

Rejecting this business-as-usual approach, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched his
disarmament agenda with an address at the University of Geneva on May 24, 2018.¹ The UN Office
for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) simultaneously released a 73-page non-paper that elaborated this
new agenda,² and in October, it issued the agenda’s implementation plan.³

This article will describe the initiative’s key themes and proposals and identify those features that
represent continuity or change relative to proposals advanced by his predecessors. It will also
discuss obstacles to implementation and opportunities for progress. Finally, it will reflect on the
broader role of the United Nations, its Secretariat, and its secretary-general in advancing global
disarmament objectives.

Continuity

That a UN secretary-general would speak out on disarmament should hardly evoke surprise. After all,
each leader since 1946 has addressed the issue as a UN priority, especially nuclear disarmament.
Dag Hammarskjöld referred to nuclear disarmament in 1955 as the UN’s “hardy perennial,” while U
Thant stressed the social and economic costs of the Cold War. Kurt Waldheim elaborated on
disarmament at length in his annual reports on the work of the UN. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar presided
over the establishment in the Secretariat of the Department for Disarmament Affairs. Boutros
Boutros-Ghali approached disarmament as part of a larger process of peace building. Kofi Annan
often addressed disarmament in his speeches, emphasizing the norm-setting role of the UN and its
contributions in strengthening the multilateral principles of disarmament.

Guterres’ immediate predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, was also a prominent advocate for disarmament. He
was the first incumbent secretary-general to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Semipalatinsk nuclear
test site, and the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. He created the post of high representative in
the new Office for Disarmament Affairs, and he was the first secretary-general to offer his own
comprehensive disarmament proposal, which addressed nuclear weapons, conventional arms,
missiles, space weapons, and military spending.⁴

All of these secretaries-general recognized that real progress, especially in nuclear disarmament,
depended on actions by member states. They understood well that the lack of progress was a
reflection of the interests and priorities of states, not any failure on the part of the UN. They knew
the severe limitations facing their initiatives absent a good faith effort by states to fulfil their
disarmament commitments.

Overall, their combined intention was less to cause disarmament than to cultivate a political
environment conducive to progress on a global level. They sought to raise questions, gather data,
and identify specific actions that would advance disarmament goals, elevate priorities, rally support
among concerned member states and civil society groups, and educate the public about how
disarmament advances the principles and goals of the UN and its charter.

New Elements

Although consistent with the views of his predecessors, the Guterres agenda contains some new
elements that help to distinguish it from their proposals.

Guterres, who became secretary-general in January 2017, had been known for his competent service
as Portugal’s prime minister and for his work in humanitarian affairs, having served as the UN high
commissioner for refugees. As a candidate for secretary-general, he did not identify disarmament as
his top priority, a stance that might not be helpful in gaining the support of the permanent members
of the Security Council, which are the five NPT-recognized nuclear powers (China, France, Russia, the
United Kingdom, and the United States). Yet in announcing a detailed, comprehensive disarmament
agenda a year later, he clearly identified this set of issues as a personal priority and a hallmark of his
incumbency.
His proposal coincides with a growing interest in multilateral arenas in the humanitarian approach to disarmament. This approach is prominent in the deliberations of the UN General Assembly and in meetings of the NPT parties. The General Assembly’s adoption of the nuclear weapons prohibition treaty in 2017 and the subsequent awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize later that year to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons were direct reflections of that approach.

Izumi Nakamitsu, the current UN high representative for disarmament affairs and the secretary-general’s most senior adviser in the Secretariat on disarmament matters, also comes from a background in humanitarian affairs, most notably on issues relating to refugees and development. In the UN Secretariat, the Guterres/Nakamitsu team no doubt will have the strong support from governments and civil society groups advancing the humanitarian approach to disarmament. This, in turn, will help in gaining recognition from elsewhere in the Secretariat of the importance of disarmament to the advancement of virtually all formal UN goals as set forth in the UN Charter.

Thus, in contrast to his predecessors, Guterres has placed himself at the vanguard of a significant political movement in support of concrete progress on disarmament matters. He will undoubtedly face obstacles in convincing other parts of the UN family of the importance of disarmament in advancing their own issues—obstacles that former High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Angela Kane collectively called the “disarmament taboo”—but his humanitarian credentials and his explicit linkage of disarmament to development, peace-building, and other UN mandates will likely help in overcoming many of these obstacles. The greatest barriers, however, remain those that have faced his predecessors: the unwillingness or inability of the nuclear-weapon states to fulfill their disarmament commitments and the broader, misguided assumption that national security is a direct function of the weapons a state possesses.

**Broad Themes**

Guterres framed his agenda to advance three priorities, each embodying a humanitarian theme: “disarmament to save humanity,” focused on weapons of mass destruction; “disarmament to save lives,” dealing with conventional arms control; and “disarmament for future generations,” examining challenges posed by new technologies. His agenda combines many overarching themes.

**Comprehensive disarmament.** The Guterres agenda is not simply a nuclear disarmament proposal. Instead, it offers a comprehensive approach to disarmament that resembles the venerable UN goal of “general and complete disarmament under effective international control,” a subject on the General Assembly’s agenda since 1959 and which the assembly declared in 1978 was the UN’s “ultimate goal” in this field. Although the non-paper makes only a passing reference, the agenda clearly draws on decades of efforts to advance this goal in multilateral arenas.
This is quite significant because critics of disarmament have constantly declared that disarmament is a naive and even dangerous approach to dealing with security issues. They argue that nuclear disarmament would create inviting new opportunities for conventional war. They point to the problem of cheating, as disarming countries would inevitably become vulnerable to what amounts to general and complete noncompliance.

A comprehensive approach, by contrast, incorporates wider security issues in its treatment of disarmament. It recognizes the relationship between nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control and hence the need to pursue both simultaneously. It emphasizes verification, transparency, irreversibility, universality, and binding legal commitments. It recognizes the social and economic opportunity costs of excessive military spending, a problem also identified in the UN Charter (Article 26). It associates disarmament and arms control as vital to the future of international peace and security and frames the relationship between disarmament and security as mutually reinforcing and interdependent. The contrary view, that security is a prerequisite for disarmament, is heard from nuclear-weapon states to explain their failure to disarm.

**International malaise.** In making his case for disarmament, Guterres, in his agenda document, emphasizes the risks associated with the world “on the brink of a new Cold War,” characterized by a “deteriorating international security environment,” “unrestrained arms competition,” and “surreptitious interference in domestic political processes and the increasing pursuit of malicious and hostile acts just below traditional thresholds for the use of force.” He regrets the decline of multilateralism and the lack of disarmament negotiations. He calls the current nuclear risks “unacceptable” and “growing.”

**The norm against using nuclear weapons.** Guterres endorses the joint statements by U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” adding that “[a]ny effort to expand the possible range of situations in which
nuclear weapons are designed to be used could be destabilizing and jeopardizes the 72-year practice of non-use.”

**Challenges facing the UN.** Guterres has a great deal to say about UN shortcomings in advancing disarmament. He states, “Despite [its] proven benefits, disarmament is not well integrated in the work of the United Nations in conflict mediation and prevention. And its tool set needs to be brought up to date, especially in the collection and use of data.” He affirms that “the total elimination of nuclear weapons remains the highest disarmament priority of the United Nations. But our efforts towards this end remain in a state of severe crisis.” He has recommendations for improving the relevance and work of the General Assembly First Committee on disarmament and international security, the Conference on Disarmament, the UNODA, and even his own Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters.

**Various dimensions of disarmament.** More than his predecessors, Guterres stresses the risks facing urban populations from the lack of progress on disarmament and the perpetuation of military confrontations worldwide. “Civilians,” he states, “continue to bear the brunt of armed conflict around the globe.” He stresses that “humanitarian and security considerations are not mutually exclusive, and they both underpin and lend urgency to all the efforts of the international community…. As armed conflict has moved from open fields and into villages, towns and cities, the humanitarian impact has been devastating.”

With regard to development goals, he says that “excessive spending on weapons drains resources for sustainable development. It is incompatible with creating stable, inclusive societies; strong institutions; effective governance and democracy; and a culture of respect for human rights.”

Further, he says that “mobilizing sufficient resources in support of disarmament and arms regulation is critical to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”

Reflecting on nuclear-weapon risks, he says that this “demands that disarmament and nonproliferation are put at the [center] of the work of the United Nations,” emphasizing that “the existing norms for the disarmament and nonproliferation of nuclear weapons are mutually reinforcing and inextricably linked.”

Dialogue and negotiations. His agenda places a particularly heavy emphasis on the importance of “engagement, dialogue, and negotiations.” He stresses that “[i]n order to realize an improvement in the international security environment, it will be necessary for the international community not only to work to devalue the role of military options in seeking security, but also to revalue the role of political dialogue and negotiations for disarmament and arms control as the safer, smarter, and more effective means for achieving the same ends.”

New technologies. Guterres identifies several risks from emerging technologies, including lethal autonomous weapons systems, hypersonic glide vehicles, long-range conventional weapons, maneuverable re-entry vehicles, and cyberweapons. “We could even face the creation of cyberweapons of mass destruction,” he warns.

New partnerships. He addresses the importance of diversifying the base in support of disarmament. “Disarmament initiatives have been most successful when they involved effective partnerships between all the relevant stakeholders—governments, the expert community, and civil society organizations—as well as strong interest and support from the general public and well-functioning international negotiation forums.” He adds, “There also needs to be more efforts to include other actors with a stake in the disarmament processes, including from private sector and industry, in the work of the United Nations.”

**Specific Actions**

Ironically, Guterres’ proposals for nuclear disarmament in many ways are the most disappointing, especially regarding the details in the implementation plan. The recommendations read like a compilation of standard proposals routinely included in annual General Assembly resolutions, with very few innovations. He is in favor of reducing stockpiles, ensuring nonuse, reducing their role in security doctrines, constraining modernization, bringing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty into
force, increasing transparency, developing verification, halting the production of fissile material for weapons, resuming disarmament and arms control negotiations, strengthening and expanding nuclear-weapon-free zones, adhering to the Iran nuclear deal, and supporting the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

There is very little discussion of exactly how states are to be persuaded to implement these desired actions. He offers a recitation of ends, but with respect to means, his heaviest emphasis is on the vague recipe for dialogue and engagement.

With regard to chemical and biological weapons, he emphasizes accountability and further progress on achieving universal adherence to the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological Weapons Convention. He stresses the Security Council’s primary responsibility to halt further erosion of the norm against chemical weapons use by ending impunity and ensuring accountability for any use.

He calls for new leadership and unity among the Security Council and secretary-general to restore respect for the global norm against chemical weapons use, including through the creation of an impartial mechanism to identify those responsible for the use in Syria. He proposes the establishment of a UN core, standing, coordinating capacity to conduct independent investigations of the alleged use of biological weapons. He also draws a connection between other UN public health-related activities and efforts to respond to or prevent the use of biological weapons.

Guterres seeks establishment of risk reduction measures, including commitments not to introduce cruise missiles, and re-engagement with the international community to address issues related to missiles. He proposes a study by the UNODA and the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) on the implications of long-range conventional weapons, including those using hypersonic technologies, and encourages the United States and Russia to “resolve their dispute” over the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty constraints on long-range nuclear forces. (The United States announced its intention to withdraw from the INF Treaty after the Guterres agenda was released.)

Conventional arms are the focus of several of the more innovative proposals in the Guterres agenda.
He supports a political declaration relating to the use of such weapons in populated areas. He supports increased transparency and accountability on the use of armed drones while favoring the development of common standards for the transfer, stockpiling, and use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles. He promotes more effective state and regional action on excessive and poorly maintained stockpiles. He recognizes the importance of exploring opportunities for regional dialogue on building confidence on military matters, including by encouraging mutual restraint in military expenditures and arms acquisitions, stockpiling, and transfers.

For the UN, he calls for creating casualty recording mechanisms among human rights components of UN peace operations. He supports the introduction of “civilian harm mitigation cells” within the military structure of UN and member states’ forces involved in conflicts. He says that the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy should include, as part of risk assessments, information from UN entities about the types of weapons and their use on the battlefield. He urges a strengthened and coherent UN interagency coordination on improvised explosive devices to ensure a whole-of-system approach.

Guterres says that he will pursue a new UN model for sustained funding for international assistance for the control of small arms and light weapons and will establish a UN multipartner trust facility through the Peacebuilding Fund to provide a more sustainable solution with a strong development focus. He calls on the UNODA and UNIDIR to study how knowledge of the impact of arms, especially excessive and destabilizing accumulations, can be incorporated into analyses of risk.

Addressing new and emerging weapons technology, his goals include preventing the emergence of new and destabilizing strategic weapons, including in outer space; fostering a culture of accountability and adherence to norms, rules, and principles for responsible behavior in cyberspace; exploring how UN entities can facilitate the exchange of information on new weapon reviews; facilitating the exchange of information and experiences between states on reviews of new weapons; working with scientists, engineers, and industry to encourage responsible innovation of science and technology; ensuring that humans remain at all times in control over the use of force; and making the secretary-general’s good offices available to contribute to the prevention and peaceful settlement of conflict stemming from malicious activity in cyberspace.

The Guterres agenda identifies some additional reforms, largely procedural, relating to the Conference on Disarmament, General Assembly, UNODA, and UNIDIR. More generally, it calls for efforts to improve coordination among the disarmament organs, reduce redundancy in their deliberations, utilize available expertise better and achieve more equitable representation, and undertake studies by the UNODA and UNIDIR on ways to better coordinate and integrate the work and expertise among the various disarmament bodies. Yet, there is little discussion of reforms needed in the Security Council, except with respect to arrangements to ensure accountability for chemical or biological weapons use.

The agenda calls for efforts to facilitate strategic security dialogue at the regional level and to revitalize existing regional forums or establish new ones aimed at developing common regional approaches to global problems. It calls for increased engagement between the UNODA and the UN Department of Political Affairs to strengthen existing platforms for regional dialogue on security and arms control. It encourages the establishment of new regional nuclear-weapon-free zones. The agenda underscores the need for UN efforts to ensure equal, full, and effective participation of women in all decision-making processes related to disarmament and to make gender parity “a moral duty and an operational necessity.”

The agenda’s goals for civil society and youth include efforts to facilitate participation by nongovernmental organizations in disarmament forums; encourage greater public engagement on security priorities, including on military spending; ensure that civil society investments are fully consistent with international legal norms; engage entrepreneurs and business leaders to build further momentum for societal engagement in advancing the shared norms of humanity; achieve the greater integration of experts, industry, and civil society representatives into the meetings of all UN disarmament bodies; establish more disarmament education and training opportunities for youth; and facilitate the public’s access to tools, training, and networks useful for addressing local problems “where measures for disarmament, demilitarization and the prevention of armed violence can make a difference.”
Looking Ahead

This agenda faces numerous obstacles. Some are political, the most challenging being to win the support of the nuclear-weapon states. Developing countries will generally support the agenda, but some may resist its full implementation, especially on issues such as the use of explosives in cities, the arms trade, reductions in military expenditures, and enhanced transparency.

Other obstacles are economic: How will the agenda be funded? Will the UN’s work in disarmament receive additional financial and personnel resources? The agenda does not address this challenge. There are also many technical problems to be resolved relating to evolving weapons technologies and including some familiar problems of developing the means to verify effectively that nuclear disarmament is actually occurring and verifying that fissile material is not being produced for use in weapons. Other work remains to be done at the International Atomic Energy Agency and among states on solving the technical problems of verifying stocks of fissile material and their movement within and across borders.

Yet, the agenda may open up new opportunities for progress in disarmament. The emphasis on data collection is surely an area where the UN has a potential contribution to make. Unfortunately, the agenda failed to mention the UNODA’s own repository of nuclear weapons information, which it created following a mandate established at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.7 Although meager in its present state, it at least offers an opening for future improvement, which would be fully consistent with the secretary-general’s emphasis on data collection elsewhere in his agenda.

The agenda’s repeated emphasis on the importance of cities in the field of disarmament offers many possibilities for constructive action in the years ahead. The international nongovernmental organization Mayors for Peace has members from more than 7,600 cities worldwide.8 Each year for the last dozen years, the U.S. Conference of Mayors has adopted a resolution in support of nuclear disarmament, arms control, and reductions in military spending and the redirection of such resources to meeting the needs of cities.9 City mayors, joined by state and local governments, have much to contribute in building political support for disarmament, mainly by bringing the issue down to earth by establishing its relevance to individual citizens. Yet, they were not in the agenda.

The Guterres agenda has only just been announced, and it remains a work in progress. Its weaknesses, especially apparent in the nuclear disarmament field, should not obscure its many contributions to the evolution of national and multilateral efforts to advance disarmament, nonproliferation, and arms control while limiting military spending. It has already contributed to advancing the humanitarian approach to disarmament and has the potential to deepen cooperation between the UN and city, state, and local governments in addition to national parliaments.10

The agenda’s implementation plan will require some modifications over the years to come, and if U.S.-Russian relations improve and enable a resumption of strategic nuclear arms control, if not progress in disarmament itself, this agenda will have gone far in establishing an overarching framework for enhancing security through disarmament.

States view the world through the lenses of their own particular interests, but Guterres has attempted to approach disarmament as a challenge facing the entire world community, actually all of humanity, including future generations. His disarmament agenda offers a view from the world community’s “center,” a welcome contrast to the prevalent countervailing trends of rising nationalism and militarism.

ENDNOTES


5. Guterres remarks.


10. Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) has been working for many years to promote parliamentary support for disarmament. PNND, http://www.pnnd.org/ (accessed December 16, 2018).

Randy Rydell, executive adviser to Mayors for Peace, was a senior political affairs officer in the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs from 1998 to 2014. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Mayors for Peace.

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