



**Parliamentary Symposium on Nuclear Disarmament: The NPT at 50:
Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament**

“Disarmament to Save Humanity: Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament”

**(Hosted by Fletcher Tabuteau, MP, Parliamentary Undersecretary for
Disarmament and Arms Control)**

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Your Excellency, Mr. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Disarmament and Arms Control,

Your Excellency, Mr. Parliamentary Undersecretary for Disarmament and Arms Control,

Honourable Wayne Mapp,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to the New Zealand Public Advisory Committee on Disarmament and Arms Control for the invitation to speak today. It is very much an honour to be among such esteemed company.

I would also like to use this occasion to thank New Zealand for its historic and ongoing support to the cause of disarmament and, in particular, to the elimination of nuclear weapons. New Zealand has been a principled and pragmatic champion of this cause and a true friend of the United Nations. No one has more exemplified this commitment than New Zealand's Ambassador for Disarmament, Dell Higgie.

New Zealand's track record speaks for itself. From its leadership on ending nuclear testing, to driving the creation of the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone, to its role in the New Agenda Coalition and, most recently, as an architect of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, this country has long been one of the most ardent supporters of a world free of nuclear weapons.

It is a sad fact that today, such passion and leadership is needed as much as ever.

And it is not just from governments that it is required. I meet with and speak to many different stakeholders, but parliamentarians are among the most important. Regardless of whether they are in government or opposition, they have a profound role to play in nuclear disarmament. It is an issue that cuts across the political spectrum and impacts every citizen of every country.

Parliaments, as the direct representatives of those citizens have both norm-setting and oversight responsibilities to perform. Through their legislative powers, they uphold the rule of law both nationally and internationally.

In the field of nuclear disarmament, parliamentarians can hold governments accountable for the commitments and obligations they have undertaken and increase transparency about policymaking and implementation. They can use moral, fiscal and legislative pressure to make sure governments move the world closer to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The international networks created by parliamentarians – many of which include Kiwis – have been successful in achieving progress and strengthening the global disarmament and non-proliferation regime, not just for nuclear weapons but for all weapons of mass destruction, and other weapons judged to be inhumane, such as landmines or cluster munitions.

But let me return to nuclear disarmament as the focus of this symposium.

As the Secretary-General has repeatedly underscored, nuclear disarmament is the United Nations' highest disarmament priority and has been for nearly three quarters of a century.

This is predominantly for three reasons.

The first is that, after seventy-five years, nuclear weapons remain the most destructive weapons invented. Most of the weapons in today's arsenals are vastly more powerful than those that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki and caused lasting human suffering in 1945.

The second reason is that, along with climate change, nuclear weapons pose one of two existential threats to the planet. Nuclear war would, in all likelihood, precipitate an environmental cataclysm.

The third is that any use of nuclear weapons would create a humanitarian catastrophe. No country can adequately respond to the use of a nuclear weapon, especially one detonated in a populated area.

In an age of competing priorities – global warming, food insecurity, pandemics, mass migration, economic disparity, to name but a few – it is for these reasons that nuclear weapons still remain one of the highest.

In the pursuit of nuclear disarmament, 2020 presents something of an inflection point. This is primarily because of the 2020 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons or NPT. 2020 is special in that it commemorates both the fiftieth anniversary of the NPT's entry into force and also the twenty-fifth anniversary of its indefinite extension.

This second anniversary deserves special attention. Its outcome reflects a clear emphasis on the grand bargain at the heart of the Treaty. This has been reflected in NPT deliberations over the past twenty-five years.

I will return to the NPT momentarily, but 2020 is also important for other nuclear weapons-related reasons. It may be the year in which the Prohibition Treaty enters into force. 2020 will be critical to the future of the Joint Comprehensive Programme of Action on Iran's nuclear programme. And it is also effectively the last year before the New START Treaty expires.

These events are taking place against a troubling international backdrop. It is, as Secretary-General Guterres rightly noted, one in which the “nuclear menace” is growing. Relations between nuclear-armed States are becoming more hostile. They are characterized by bellicose rhetoric, including about the use of nuclear weapons. Trust and transparency are waning, along with the appetite for dialogue.

In parallel, all nuclear-armed States are upgrading their arsenals. It has been argued that we are in the midst of a new qualitative nuclear arms race, one not based on numbers of weapons but rather their speed, stealth and accuracy.

The Cold War bipolar order has been replaced with a more complex multipolarity that includes not only nuclear dyads, but triads. Regional conflicts with nuclear dimensions are worsening, as are proliferation challenges. We need only look to the Middle East, South Asia, or Northeast Asia to see the dangerous and destabilizing regional consequences of nuclear weapons programmes.

Technological innovations are exposing potential new vulnerabilities and proliferation concerns. Combinations of innovations in computing power, remote sensing, networks, machine learning and robotics could have serious implications for the speed at which future conflicts are fought, with dangerous ramifications for escalation control.

There is anxiety about the possibility, in our increasingly networked society, for the hacking and spoofing of nuclear command and control structures. Despite the obvious potential for disaster, the notion of so-called ‘dead hand’ systems – that is, automated second-strike capabilities – has been updated for the AI-era and propagated by serious policy thinkers.

While all these dynamics are unfolding, the nuclear arms control regime is collapsing, and the multilateral institutions supposed to produce the next steps in disarmament remain in a more than two-decade state of paralysis.

Such worrying trends have produced a situation in which the possibility that nuclear weapons are used – deliberately, by accident or through miscalculation – is higher than it has been for decades.

According to some, we are in a geostrategic climate that is not conducive to disarmament or arms control, both of which are seen as actions to be pursued only in times of relative stability.

I believe there are several problems with this logic.

First of all, I agree that security considerations must be taken into account. The world *has* changed since the Cold War and its end, and this is something the international community continues to grapple with. I should also stress that the security of its people is the primary responsibility of every government – something the people in this room know well.

But I also believe that disarmament is *part* of efforts to strengthen security, as it always has been. To see it as something idealistic or utopian is to dismiss the hard security benefits gained from such instruments, including the NPT. Disarmament and arms control help to create transparency and to establish confidence when there is none – not least through

building habits of cooperation. When trust does not exist, the best agreements contain rigorous verification protocols to prevent cheating.

Hand in hand with other measures, including diplomatic initiatives, disarmament and arms control instruments help prevent instability from tipping over into armed conflict.

The second problem that I see is that, absent efforts to secure disarmament and arms control, we are left with nothing but unconstrained strategic competition. This can only lead to the dangerous patterns of behaviour that brought us to the brink of nuclear war during the Cold War, including the “tit for tat” development and acquisition of destabilizing weapons systems. And by the way, Cold War leaders knew this reality and drew important lessons.

A third problem relates directly to the current environment, with its new variables of technological evolution and different players. It is a new environment in which old ideas about deterrence could become problematic and quite possibly disastrous.

Finally, for the three reasons I have already mentioned, nuclear weapons remain in a class of their own. If we all agree that these inhumane and catastrophic weapons pose a unique and collective threat, why would we cease pursuing practical steps to bring about their total elimination, regardless of the security environment?

Ladies and gentlemen

The reasons I have outlined are precisely why, in 2018, the Secretary-General released his Agenda for Disarmament, *Securing Our Common Future*. The agenda outlines the avenues and practical actions the UN will pursue to find solutions to the many existing challenges to international peace and security.

While my focus today is on the “Disarmament to Save Humanity” pillar of the agenda, which focuses on weapons of mass destruction, it is important to point out that *Securing Our Common Future* is holistic. It recognizes that, while nuclear weapons pose an existential threat, it is the so-called conventional weapons that are the quotidian killers. These weapons, including their illicit circulation among state and non-state actors, are chiefly responsible for

the human suffering caused to men, boys, women and girls caught up in cycles of conflict and armed violence.

The agenda also highlights the need for new partnerships and to seek new ways to ensure new technologies are not used to threaten humanity. It also ensures a diversity of voices are brought into discussions, including civil society, women and youth.

More broadly, the agenda seeks to reinsert disarmament into its historic position as an integral component of conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution. It recognizes that security and humanitarian approaches to disarmament do not need to be mutually exclusive. Although not everyone has agreed with every part of the agenda, many States have stepped forward as champions and supporters, including New Zealand.

Perhaps the most important message the Secretary-General's Agenda seeks to promote is a call to action: Countries should not be mere bystanders to international events, they can be agents of change and authors of history.

I believe the forthcoming NPT Review Conference can provide a convergence of opportunities – a chance to address many of the challenges I've spoken about today.

I have already outlined three reasons why nuclear weapons must remain a priority. Let me now outline three reasons why the same is true for the NPT.

First, the treaty contains verifiable non-proliferation obligations on all States Parties. The track record of these safeguards speaks for themselves.

Second, the NPT is the only multilateral instrument to contain legally binding commitments to nuclear disarmament, including on the five nuclear-weapon States.

Third, it is near-universal in membership. Meaning that these commitments and obligations apply to the vast majority of the international community.

In sum, the NPT has a record of success that few other treaties can lay claim to.

2020, with its double anniversary, therefore, presents an occasion to both look back upon these achievements and also to consider how the NPT can retain its place as a pillar of international peace and security. At least, until it has achieved its goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

There are, of course, multiple obstacles to success, several of which I have already outlined. Yet, one of the largest obstacles is the absence of a common understanding of what success looks like.

Consequently, it is vital that all States parties approach the Review Conference in a spirit of flexibility and with a willingness to negotiate in good faith. States parties need to move beyond the recitation of national positions.

Leadership and the ability to negotiate between groups of stakeholders will be central to success. This is a role that New Zealand has played in the past. I hope you will be prepared to do so again.

In terms of an outcome, it is too early to foretell. Nevertheless, with your indulgence I'd like to list some of the issues that I believe should form a part of any consensus outcome.

First, a high-level reaffirmation of commitment to the Treaty and to all commitments and obligations undertaken as a Party to it. At the half-century mark of the Treaty, this seems fitting.

I appreciate that some of the commitments assumed since 1995 need to be re-evaluated for context, but many remain relevant – not least the unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon States to the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

Second, a recommitment to the norm against the use of the nuclear weapons. We should return to the logic of Reagan and Gorbachev: a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought.

Third, development of a package of risk reduction measures that can help take the world away from the prospect of nuclear weapon use and towards nuclear disarmament would be a significant confidence-building measure.

Fourth, States should recognize that challenges to non-proliferation are not static and, therefore, the regime cannot be either. At a minimum, I would hope that States parties are able to endorse the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol as the safeguards' standard.

Fifth, as I have already mentioned, the world is confronted by a variety of new nuclear challenges. But the changed conditions also present new opportunities. I hope the Review Conference can serve as a springboard for thinking on how to tackle these challenges and opportunities.

This is an issue that goes beyond the Review Conference. As the Secretary-General has said on several occasions now, the conditions in which we find ourselves requires a new vision for disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control.

A new vision is needed to establish an enduring understanding about the importance of disarmament, to reconcile competing views, and to establish how to maintain the hard-won benefits of the last fifty years while recognizing our changed circumstances.

For this reason, the extension of the New START should be a paramount priority. Its extension will prevent unconstrained nuclear competition and keep important verification mechanisms intact.

It will also provide the breathing room to think about what comes next – to take stock of our existing tool kit and assess how we can best approach the realities of the 21st century.

A new vision could, for example, consider all kinds of nuclear weapons, their delivery systems and their qualitative developments. It could address the issue of anti-missile systems – especially ballistic missile defence systems.

It should encompass the long unregulated issue of missiles, which remain the primary delivery vehicle for nuclear weapons but also increasingly undermine regional security and civilian protections.

It could look at strengthening regional approaches to disarmament, including through the development of confidence-building measures, while also seeking to address the concurrent opportunities and challenges of new technology, especially cyber security and artificial intelligence.

And it must recognize and address the gendered impact of different weapon types and systems.

Obviously, this list is not exhaustive, and much deeper thinking and broader dialogue is required.

The Secretary-General and I intend to use the convening power of the United Nations to bring together States and other stakeholders to do further thinking in this area. Groups such as civil society and industry have a clear role to play in this dialogue, as do parliamentarians, on behalf of your constituents.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We pursue a world free of nuclear weapons for two critical reasons – our security and our survival.

The uniquely destructive threat that these weapons pose means that we cannot stop taking the actions that will eventually bring about their elimination. There is no one path to achieve this goal and every possible avenue should be explored, in ways that promote our collective security and safety.

I've used the word 'challenge' quite often in this speech. I hope I've also used the word 'opportunity', because the immediate future is going to be challenging for nuclear disarmament but there will also be many opportunities at this potential tipping point in our history.

I look forward to working with you all in this great enterprise of seeking a world free of nuclear weapons. Thank you.