

From Disarmament to Rearmament?

Navigating an Inflection Point for Multilateral Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

by Rebecca Jovin



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The Knotted Gun is a non-violence sculpture in front of the UN headquarters in NYC.

“It is *precisely* at times of tension and crisis that disarmament and arms control have shown their value as key security instruments”



“Humanity’s future depends on investing in the machinery of peace, not the machinery of war.” It is with these words that the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, opened his message for this year’s International Day for Disarmament and Non-proliferation Awareness on 5 March 2025.

Indeed, we are witnessing an era of rising global tensions, resurging nuclear risk, and eroding norms and guardrails. International instruments and institutions, as well as other frameworks that have helped to safeguard people and planet for decades, are under threat, not least the concept of multilateralism itself. Looking globally at the landscape of multilateral disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation, the picture is a deeply worrying one.

Divisions among States are deepening rather than narrowing, fueled by new conflicts and distrust, as well as frustration over unfulfilled commitments, particularly those of the nuclear-weapon-states. Disarmament and arms control efforts

are increasingly confronted with the counter-trend of re-armament. According to the latest data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditure reached more than \$2.7 trillion in 2024, with spending increasing across all world regions. This 9.4 percent rise compared to 2023 represents the sharpest annual growth since the end of the Cold War, with the greatest increases in spending seen in Europe and the Middle East. Current expenditure figures amount to roughly the equivalent of 334 US dollars for every person on the planet or 2.5 percent of global gross domestic product. Meanwhile, global development aid declined in 2024, reaching only an estimated \$212.1 billion according to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data. This despite the expressed concern of Member States, as articulated in the General Assembly’s September 2024 Pact for the Future, about the potential impact that the global increase in military expenditures could have on investments in sustainable development and sustaining peace.

More than 79 years since the adoption of the first-ever United Nations General Assembly resolution, calling for the elimination of atomic and all other weapons of mass destruction, the nuclear risk is at one of the highest points in history. The role of nuclear weapons is seeing a resurgence in national security doctrines, at the same time as inflammatory nuclear rhetoric and threats have escalated in the context of regional conflicts. Nuclear weapons have – again – become tools of coercion. After witnessing significant reductions in nuclear arsenals from Cold War heights of more than 70,000 warheads down to approximately 12,000 today, we are facing a period of nuclear expansion and modernization. The risk of a nuclear accident based on miscommunication or miscalculation is further heightened by the rapid pace of technological advances and their intersection with nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, regional conflicts are exacerbating proliferation drivers.

At the same time, we are seeing an erosion of longstanding humanitarian disarmament and arms control instruments, from landmines to cluster ➤

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munitions. History has taught us the painful lesson that the ultimate victims of such short-sighted weapons are civilians, including long after conflicts have ceased and the fighting has come to an end. In the case of landmines, civilians make up more than 80 percent of casualties, more than one third of them children. Globally, more than 100 million people are estimated to be at risk from landmines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. With the urbanization of conflict, civilians also are the primary victims of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, with suffering further amplified due to the destruction of critical infrastructure from hospitals to schools to energy infrastructure.

These realities, which are impacting the very foundations and pillars of the global disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control regime, are further challenged by the lightspeed technological advances, including but

not limited to areas such as artificial intelligence. While tremendous benefits stand to be gained for humanity – including global disarmament efforts – from emerging technologies, the international community is faced with the daunting challenge of simultaneously mitigating their potential harm. From cyberattacks to the use of autonomous weapons systems, from missile technology to quantum computing, technological developments are fundamentally altering the international security landscape at rapid speed, largely outpacing governance frameworks to manage risks.

The sentiment that “now is not the time to discuss disarmament” is gaining traction; yet, history suggests otherwise. It is precisely at times of tension and crisis that disarmament and arms control have shown their value as key security instruments. From the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, agreed between the United States, Soviet Union and United Kingdom only one year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, to the Conventional Armed Forces Treaty in Europe, negotiated in the final years of the Cold War, countries have turned to arms control and disarmament to reduce tensions and safeguard their national security. Multilateral approaches continue to be at the center of what has since become a complex web of legally and politically binding instruments – today, we count some 28 international treaties geared towards eliminating or regulating different weapons with the aim of safeguarding security and mitigating suffering and harm.

This suggests that, to “navigate the storm” that confronts international peace and security, it will be paramount to uphold and consolidate the international disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation architecture and to

re-invest in confidence-building and transparency measures in pursuit of peaceful relations. The United Nations must play its part in facilitating and enabling such efforts and in sustaining the principles of the United Nations Charter and multilateralism. In this regard, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) has a unique role to support norm-setting and to foster dialogue, transparency and confidence-building. Bolstering and universalizing existing instruments while advancing dialogue to address emerging challenges and governance gaps must remain at the core of the Office’s work at this moment in history. A central component of this is also the provision of impartial, objective and authoritative advice and education on disarmament issues. As former United Nations Secretary-General, the late Kofi Annan, put it, “[e]ducation is, quite simply, peace-building by another name. It is the most effective form of defense spending there is.”

The Vienna Office of UNODA, officially inaugurated in February 2012, has from its early days served as a hub for disarmament education. The goal of such education is, on the one hand, to impart knowledge on disarmament-related issues while, on the other hand, equipping different audiences with the tools to critically assess and take action for the attainment of disarmament objectives. Here again, history has valuable lessons to offer, including a recognition that advancing disarmament is not a task that rests exclusively on the shoulders of diplomats or enlightened global leaders. Looking back in time, civil society organizations, local communities and women’s groups have often been driving forces in propelling forward efforts to establish new international norms and frameworks for disarmament and arms control. The most recent

Security Council meeting on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation at UN Headquarters in New York on March 18, 2024.



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2024 Nobel Peace Prize award to Nihon Hidankyo, a Japanese group of atomic bomb survivors, for their efforts to achieve a nuclear weapons-free world and using witness testimony to demonstrate that nuclear weapons must never be used again, is but the latest example in a proud tradition of civil society activism in support of disarmament. Several international treaties such as the Anti-Personnel Landmine Convention or the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons were driven forward in large part by the engagement and advocacy of non-governmental institutions.

Grounded in the 2002 United Nations Study on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Education, disarmament education invariably is and always has been a collective undertaking of governments, United Nations and other international organizations, regional actors, civil society, academia, media, and community leaders. As such, a partnership-driven approach remains central to achieving reach and sustainability of collective efforts. This is very much the premise of UNODA's own 2022 Disarmament Education Strategy, which provides a common framework

for action based on the principles of “inform, engage, educate and empower” and seeks to leverage the joint efforts of actors from across sectors and disciplines to increase access to and relevance of educational offers for diverse audiences. Too often, disarmament is seen as a niche, technical issue, or a domain in which average citizens, especially youth, have little agency. In this sense, “demystifying” disarmament as a concept and unpacking its relevance for the advancement of other agendas like climate action, sustainable development and human rights



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are important starting points. So too is integrating disarmament into wider peace education and conflict resolution for young audiences. Disarmament education tools need to cater not only to current experts and diplomats involved in policy-making and norm-setting processes, but also to new generations of leaders and advocates.

UNODA's umbrella Youth4Disarmament initiative and its dedicated education and empowerment programs to reach young, global audiences from different backgrounds and sectors seek precisely to advance this aim. On the one hand, to ensure that the experiences and perspectives of young leaders are integrated into multilateral disarmament processes and negotiations. And on the other, to capacitate and promote youth to share and advance their knowledge and initiatives within their own communities with the goal of shaping more secure futures for all and promoting a culture of peace.

In my time with UNODA and in particular the more than three years I have now spent at the helm of its Vienna Office, I have had the privilege of seeing disarmament education in action. I

have seen a thirst for knowledge and tools to promote disarmament that cuts across regions, disciplines and generations. With the rise in military spending, nuclear risk and armed conflict, I have witnessed a corresponding rise in demand for learning and engagement opportunities, reflected in the regular flow of visitor groups seeking briefings on disarmament issues, surging applicant rates for youth programs, and a steadily growing global usership of our online educational resources and platforms. Yet, unfortunately, sustained investment in disarmament education efforts and access to learning opportunities, especially in conflict-affected communities, remain largely elusive. Robust, multi-year investments by donor governments are the exception rather than the rule. This form of investment, however, has been essential to achieve sustainability and lasting impact, from ongoing engagement and participation of alumni in multi-lateral fora, to solidifying expert youth networks, to reinforcing institutional memory and innovative partnerships.

The inflection point, at which multi-lateral disarmament efforts now find themselves, offers an opportunity to rethink and reprioritize collective efforts. The hard-fought gains of generations past that led to the establishment of the instruments of peace and trust that have kept us all in relatively safety, that helped us navigate other storms and brought us to safe harbor throughout recent history, must be upheld and nurtured. Disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation must remain tools for security and for the preservation of human rights and international humanitarian law. Dialogue and effort to this end among States will need to take place in board rooms and negotiating fora. But it will also need to take place in classrooms and communities. It will

need to take place through universalization and implementation of existing agreements and the advancement of new ones. But equally through the preservation of lessons from the past and the stories of survivors of armed violence, and the emergence of new leaders to carry forward these lessons and legacies. What is needed is a strengthening and democratizing of access to disarmament and peace education and an expansion of youth networks, underpinned by a longer-term vision and more sustainable resources, as well as the active participation of diverse stakeholders, including governments, educators, and civil society organizations. Together, these efforts can be the building blocks to turn crisis into opportunity and instruments of war into instruments of peace.

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