

Background Paper

The Non-Proliferation Treaty and General & Complete Disarmament

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has shed light on the sharp contrast between the insufficient investment in public health infrastructure and the normalised practices of excessive spending on military modernisation, procurement and operations. Disarmament has thus become an imperative and urgent task facing the international community. The fate of disarmament will have direct bearing on the future not only of international peace and security but also on prospects for achieving all the other objectives of the United Nations (UN) Charter. The ability of the world community to achieve the agreed 17 Sustainable Development Goals assumes the non-occurrence of a nuclear war and the non-diversion of much need resources into an unconstrained arms race.

The UN Secretary-General called for a [Global Ceasefire](#) and Pope Francis sent a strong message to the world in his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*. Building on these initiatives, this paper offers ideas for a renewed holistic approach grounded on best practice and taking inspiration from [Article VI](#) of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which mandates negotiations “in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective control.”

I. History of General and Complete Disarmament (GCD)

In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted [Resolution 1378](#) – its first to be co-sponsored by all Member States – which placed GCD on its agenda, where it has remained ever since. In 1961, the United States and the Soviet Union issued the [McCloy/Zorin Joint Statement](#), outlining their agreement on the basic framework for a future GCD treaty. In 1978, the UN General Assembly – meeting in its first special session on disarmament – [agreed](#) by consensus that “general and complete disarmament under effective international control” would be the world community’s “ultimate objective”, with nuclear disarmament as its highest priority.

Over the years, GCD has appeared in the preamble of a dozen multilateral disarmament and arms control treaties:

- the 1967 Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco)
- the 1971 Treaty on the Prohibition of the Emplacement of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction on the Sea-Bed and the Ocean Floor and in the Subsoil thereof (Seabed Treaty)
- the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention
- the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention
- the 1995 Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Bangkok Treaty)

- the 1996 Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
- the 1996 African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty (Pelindaba Treaty), and
- the 2006 Treaty on Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Central Asia

At the UN, GCD continues to provide the institutionalized framework for multilateral disarmament deliberations in the General Assembly's First Committee. The UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ms Izumi Nakamitsu, has underscored its importance at a General Assembly side event on GCD held on [18 October 2017](#). The UN Secretary General has built in his 2018 [Disarmament Agenda](#) *Securing our Common Future* around this concept. The UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) has included focus on GCD in its [Strategic Plan](#) 2021-2015.

II. What GCD seeks to accomplish

As the term has evolved at the UN in three past special sessions of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament and in countless General Assembly Resolutions, GCD encompasses the following objectives:

- a) The prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons and all other weapons adaptable to mass destruction, especially biological and chemical weapons, and the means of their delivery
- b) The limitation and regulation of conventional armaments and the reduction of military spending while recognizing and preserving the sovereign right to self-defence; and
- c) Measures to strengthen mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes and to promote compliance with the UN Charter's fundamental norm against the threat or use of force.

At no time, even within the League of Nations, has GCD ever aimed at eliminating literally every weapon from every state. It has long recognized not only the right of self-defence but also the solemn responsibility of states to contribute military resources to international peacekeeping operations. The key purpose has not been to leave states defenceless, but to establish an international regime that satisfies, with high confidence, the desire and common interest of all states to prevent large-scale international wars involving the deadliest of weaponry and the diversion of excessive resources into an unconstrained arms race.

GCD is a key part of the UN peace and security architecture. It enables the General Assembly and the Security Council to fulfil their respective responsibilities under the UN Charter, thereby contributing to the realization of its purposes and principles with respect to the maintenance of international peace and security, the peaceful settlement of disputes and the prohibition of the threat and use of force in international affairs. As stipulated in [Art. 26](#) of the UN Charter, the Security Council has the responsibility “to promote the establishment and maintenance of international peace and security with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources.”

In essence, GCD is a means to make sense of the multitude of issue-specific deliberations that take place in bilateral, regional, and global arenas. Indeed, twenty-first century GCD can build on a range of concrete and verified treaties and mechanisms that were unavailable and even unimaginable when the NPT was negotiated. In this light, GCD is an inherently dynamic concept that is continually adapting to new political and technological circumstances. All states, large and small, have contributions to make in deliberating and implementing the integrated elements of GCD.

III. The NPT Review Process and GCD

GCD has rarely received serious attention in the preparatory and review processes of the NPT,

despite its presence both in the Treaty's Preamble and Article VI. It has not been the focus of any Working Paper in recent decades and is a subject that is typically addressed only in passing. The consensus Final Document of the [2010 NPT Review Conference](#) did not mention GCD. A debate on GCD, therefore, would build on the Treaty's stated goal of review conferences of "assuring that the purposes of the Preamble and the provisions of the Treaty are being realised" (Article VIII(3)).

The NPT review process provides a unique opportunity for the states parties to consider the various ways that comprehensive progress in disarmament and non-proliferation serve to strengthen international peace and security, at literally all levels: national, regional, and global. Such progress helps to prevent or limit arms races, improve regional stability, build trust and confidence, reduce incentives to expand military spending, and limit the risk of catastrophic terrorist acts. These are only a few of the security benefits that flow from disarmament agreements that satisfy long-agreed multilateral criteria of verification, irreversibility, transparency, and universality in law.

IV. Recommendations for the 2021 Review Conference

- a) GCD should be included as a prominent substantive issue in any Final Document or Report emerging from the 2021 NPT Review Conference.
- b) The 2021 Review Conference should dedicate specific time within the subsidiary body in Main Committee 1 to the elaboration of approaches for GCD.
- c) The Preparatory Committee to the 2025 Review Conference should devote at least one meeting of its sessions before the 2025 Review Conference to the relationship of the NPT to GCD.
- d) The draft [Model Treaty on GCD](#) prepared by a group of civil society and academic experts within the SCRAP Project of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) should be introduced to the attention of States Parties for further consideration.