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EDITORIAL: CHOOSING WELL-BEING OVER WEAPONS

Ray Acheson | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

This year's First Committee session will be unusual for all of us. Delegates will meet in the General Assembly Hall in masks and in limited numbers. Most delegations will have colleagues monitoring from home across many time zones, along with civil society—which isn't allowed in UN Headquarters at all. There will be no chats over coffee, no heated arguments in tiny, overstuffed rooms about resolutions, and no thematic debate. Nevertheless, the session is on—which means we all need to make the most of this strange situation. We should use it as an opportunity to figure out what parts of the work are actually useful—do we need 60 resolutions that are largely repetitive from year to year, or can we focus our efforts on urgent needs that advance policy? Given the limited time for governments to lay out their positions, what can we focus on that will actually lead to cooperation and action on the most important issues?

"Power" vs. disarmament, peace, and security

The pandemic-shaped shadow hanging over our work is not the only challenge we face. Our world is also confronted with ongoing armed conflict, the climate crisis, inequalities and poverty, as well as issues of accountability and compliance with international obligations. Last year, the First Committee also almost didn't happen. It was delayed multiple times due to concerns about restricted access for some delegations by the host country. When it did eventually stumble into gear, the most militarised governments in the world attacked each other relentlessly for several weeks, accusing each other of undermining the "international security environment," violating international "law and order," and imperilling our planet.

The "law and order" of the so-called international community is not about adherence to or respect for international law, but is arguably an order that privileges the militarily powerful over the rest of the world; and that permits the selective implication

of the law (disarmament and arms control law, in relation to the First Committee) in ways that serve this unequal and unjust order. Whether it is discussions about violations of the Chemical Weapons Convention, the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, or international humanitarian law, or about the development of norms and rules against the weaponisation of or warfare in cyber space or outer space, certain countries tend to dominate in a way that undercuts the very object and purpose of the First Committee—to pursue international security through disarmament and demilitarisation. They demand others comply with the law while flouting it themselves.

Investments in violence

While last year's session of the First Committee did manage to scrape through its general and thematic debates and pass about 60 draft resolutions along to the General Assembly for adoption, it's important to examine the tangible impact this has had on our world. There is always, of course, the immeasurable but positive impact that diplomacy has in terms of building or sustaining channels for cooperation among states. We certainly saw some delegations come together in innovative ways through joint statements, pressing for deeper commitments against the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and raising gender perspectives on disarmament, for example. We also saw governments recommit to various disarmament processes and principles.

But we also saw the exhausting pattern of disengagement or disassociation by nuclear-armed states, or chemical-armed states, or explosive-weapon-using states, or autonomous-weapon-building states, etc., from any of the initiatives or decisions that could constrain their armament intentions and capabilities. We witnessed the ways in which countries that assign value to their weapons fighting to preserve not just their right to possess

weapons of mass destruction or indiscriminate human suffering but to ensure that value continues to be ascribed to these weapons by their allies—while also trying to prevent their proliferation to those deemed too “irresponsible” to handle them.

We also saw, throughout the year, massive investments in militarism. Global military spending increased by 3.6 per cent in 2019, rising to a **staggering \$1.9 trillion**. During the pandemic, in many countries arms producers have been **deemed essential services**—putting workers at risk and diverting money away from those in desperate need of protective gear, ventilators, medical personnel, and affordable access to health care. Arms transfers also largely **continued unabated**, despite the resounding rhetorical support for the UN Secretary-General’s **appeal for a global ceasefire** in March. Investments in **nuclear weapon modernisation** has also continued despite those billions being needed elsewhere; and while some joint military exercises were cancelled, the US and some other countries continued to deploy troops to **military bases** around the world—exposing soldiers and local populations alike to the coronavirus, all in the name of “security”.

Shaping peace together

This “order,” maintained through militarism at the expense of human and planetary well-being, is not the faith of the majority of governments, however. Most countries continue to reject nuclear weapons, and militarism more broadly, as beneficial to security. Many recognise that weapons and war are in reality the main impediments to security, as well as to peace, freedom, justice, and equality. At the **UN General Assembly high-level debate** in September, **Italy** called for reinvestment in politics, diplomacy, dialogue, and international law over militarism. “We should do so not only to fulfill our natural aspirations toward peace, but because history—the most recent even more so than earlier chapters—shows that the recourse to arms is not sustainable nor lasting.”

The rejection of weapons and war as assets of “peace and security” is where the First Committee must ground its work. We are marking 75 years of

the organisation’s existence—75 years since the end of the horrific slaughter that was World War II and 75 years of the Charter’s promise to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” We are also, however, marking 75 years since the first detonations of atomic bombs, in New Mexico, USA and on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. Seventy-five years of nuclear violence. Seventy-five years of war and armed conflict, of military interventions and coups, of continued investments in weapons, of the spread of nuclear bombs and drones and explosive weapons and small arms.

As the First Committee meets in this 75th year of the United Nations, it must stake a claim for peace and security based on cooperation and collaboration, not on competition and corrosive politicking. “Global security is improved through mutual trust, transparency, and disarmament,” noted the Austrian ambassador at a recent **UN event against nuclear testing**. This is the foundation of diplomacy, and of disarmament. Participants in the First Committee’s work must advance disarmament not just through platitudes but through action that has a tangible impact on the material realities of world, and our cultural attitudes towards weapons and war.

Allowing the governments with the most weapons to dictate what is possible to the world is not acceptable. They have led us to violence; we must refuse to follow them any further and embark instead on a new road to peace, building our future through collective actions and investments not in weapons but in collective care for each other and our planet.

The preview edition of the 2020 First Committee Monitor contains reports on recent UN meetings, highlighting the positions of governments on issues relevant for the First Committee. It also includes recommendations from activists across the full range of First Committee issues, drawn from RCW’s First Committee Briefing Book published in September. These publications, as well as primary documentation and reports as First Committee proceeds, are available at www.reachingcriticalwill.org.

THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF UN CYBER DIPLOMACY

Allison Pytlak | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Cyber security has rapidly become one of the more fractious issues on the First Committee's agenda. Since the duelling resolutions that established the UN's two current—and concurrent—processes on cyber-related issues in 2018 the subject has continued to be caught up in the growing politicisation which now characterises many interactions at the First Committee.

This year promises more of the same.

Russia sponsored the 2018 First Committee resolution that established the **UN's Open-ended Working Group (OEWG)** on information and communications technology in the context of international security. The OEWG has met for two of its three scheduled formal substantive sessions; the third was postponed due to COVID-19. The plan is for states to agree to a consensus report at that third and final session, and then for its chairperson to report back on its outcomes during this 75th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). "Regular institutional dialogue" is one of six agenda items that the OEWG discusses and it is in that context that many expect that the OEWG's report will identify a (consensus-based) recommendation, or approach, for how best to continue dialogue within the UN on this subject, possibly in a more permanent or longstanding way.

Russia, however, is already moving to set up such a body by sponsoring a new resolution at the 2020 First Committee that would establish a subsequent OEWG, envisioned to commence work next year and conclude during the 80th UNGA session (i.e. in 2025). While many states have indicated in their OEWG statements and elsewhere that they support in principle establishing a regular cyber forum, the move to establish another OEWG before the current one has concluded its work—or been able to fully discuss and agree the modalities of a potential future forum—is procedurally conflicted and prejudices a potential OEWG outcome. While not yet finalised, the

draft also reportedly contains language pertaining to the dissemination of false or distorted news, as well as defamation activities between states, which would be new content in First Committee resolutions on this topic and is likely to encounter pushback.

Additionally, there is a proposal being explored informally within the OEWG to negotiate a politically binding programme of action in the area of state behaviour in cyber space, modelled loosely on the UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons. That proposal is still in its early days but gaining traction; if it does move forward, possibly as an OEWG recommendation or output, then it too would need to be reconciled with a new, five-year long OEWG, should the Russian resolution be adopted.

Meanwhile, the United States sponsored the 2018 First Committee resolution that established the UN's sixth Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on state behaviour in cyber space and is on track to sponsor again a cyber-related resolution this year. Reportedly, the US resolution will welcome the work of both the GGE and the OEWG, which could be viewed as a diplomatic olive branch, but urges against deciding on a future course of institutional dialogue until the OEWG and the GGE have completed their work (i.e. the opposite of what the Russian proposal seeks to do).

Finally, Switzerland will introduce a technical draft decision relating to the postponement of the third OEWG formal session and requesting approval to have it from 8–12 March 2021. In theory this should be a straightforward technical request that already has tacit approval of member states. Yet because at least one member state (Russia) had lobbied hard to have an in-person final session in July 2020, amidst the pandemic, it would not be surprising if there are some surprises in store before the new dates are settled, or if those dates become a bargaining chip to gain support for the new OEWG resolution.

In a year when the First Committee will have a significantly reduced number of meetings, and the only way to negotiate resolutions is virtual, and both the OEWG and GGE are still in progress, one can't help but feel that the Russian and US resolutions are deliberately provocative and will only contribute to exacerbating pre-existing divisions. Which is disappointing, considering that multilateralism is

under threat but also that that digital insecurity, at all levels, has increased dramatically and exponentially, not least during the health pandemic. These two points were underscored by countless leaders during the [UNGA high-level thematic debate](#), and the [UN at 75 special event](#). The international community cannot afford to lose time to political deadlock on this rapidly evolving threat.

BACK TO BASICS: CAN THE UK INITIATIVE RESET A STALLED CONVERSATION ON SPACE SECURITY?

Jessica West | Project Ploughshares

An effort to restart the stalled global conversation on space security is underway at the United Nations this year. Led by the United Kingdom (UK), this initiative is intended to support “a global discussion to avoid conflict in space”, as outlined in an [August 2020 press release](#). Specifically, the goal is to “broker an international consensus on responsible behaviour in space” as a means to increase trust and confidence among countries operating in space.

Both the content and process of this initiative should be welcomed. This is the first concrete measure that builds on the long-standing interest among many states to prioritise voluntary norms of responsible behaviour in outer space, by asking what those behaviours—or those that feel threatening—might look like. The answer to this question remains open. As the UK Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament (CD) Aidan Liddle has [explained](#), the process is designed as an “open, inclusive, bottom-up approach ... without a pre-determined solution.”

This is a clear contrast with the most recent space security initiative, the 2018-2019 Group of Government Experts (GGE) on further effective measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS), a closed process intended to make recommendations on a new, legally binding arms control agreement. While reportedly generating helpful insights into what such an instrument might

look like and what the stumbling blocks may be, the process concluded without consensus, which has reinforced political acrimony and divides.

Can this new approach by the UK succeed? Much will depend on the will of states to participate in good faith. This is clearly not the conversation that those who prioritise a traditional approach to arms control want to have. But it is related. And the goal of avoiding an arms escalation or outright warfighting in outer space is clearly aided by a shared understanding of how to behave in ways that are not seen as threatening to others.

Success will also depend on listening. A frank conversation is in order, particularly one that moves beyond the finger pointing that has marred debate at the First Committee over the last several years. The focus on addressing “threatening behaviour” is sorely needed but may make this difficult. Expanding the conversation on norms beyond “like-minded states” is positive first step. Now they must be heard. I suspect that for many states, it is the growing emphasis on warfighting in space itself that is most threatening, and a recommitment to the peaceful use of outer space that is desired. These voices should be heeded.

HIGH-LEVEL CALLS TO ACT ON KILLER ROBOTS

Mary Wareham | Campaign to Stop Killer Robots

The high-level opening debate of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September saw a few high-level references to emerging technologies and concerns over lethal autonomous weapon systems.

Pope Francis warned that lethal autonomous weapon systems (“killer robots”) would “irreversibly alter the nature of warfare, detaching it further from human agency.” He called on states to “break with the present climate of distrust” that is leading to “an erosion of multilateralism, which is all the more serious in light of the development of new forms of military technology.”

The Pope’s UNGA address marks the first time that he has commented explicitly on killer robots, indicating the Vatican maybe preparing to intensify its work in this regard. The Holy See first called for a ban on lethal autonomous weapon systems in May 2014 and has participated in all eight Convention on Conventional Weapons (CCW) meetings on killer robots held since then, most recently on 21-25 September 2020.

The CCW talks have been criticised for responding too slowly to the rapid advances driving military investments in artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. Precursors to killer robots are proliferating alarmingly and, if left unchecked, could result in the dehumanisation of warfare.

In his UNGA address, Austria’s foreign minister Alexander Schallenberg concurred with the UN Secretary-General’s strong concerns over giving “machines the power to decide who lives and who dies.” Schallenberg said, “We have to act now, before the survival of civilians in a conflict zone is determined by an algorithm and before all constraints laid down in international humanitarian law become redundant and decisions are taken by killer-robots without any human control or ethical concerns.”

Schallenberg invited all states to Vienna in 2021 to participate in an international meeting “to address this urgent issue.” Earlier in 2020, Brazil convened an international meeting to discuss how to address autonomous weapon systems, while Germany held the first virtual meeting on the subject at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Japan is also scheduled to hold its meeting on killer robots in December 2020.

These meetings will occur outside of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) convened by the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) and demonstrate how political interest is growing as it becomes apparent that regulation will not be possible at the CCW. This is because a handful of military powers—most notably Russia and the United States—have spent the past seven years deflected proposals to negotiate a legally-binding instrument on killer robots, calling such a move “premature.”

Russia did not attend the CCW meeting on killer robots held at the UN in Geneva but raised procedural concerns in the lead-up and strongly recommended that two meetings planned for 2020 be postponed until 2021.

President Vladimir Putin did not directly address lethal autonomous weapon systems in his 22 September address, but commented on the need to regulate emerging technologies. Putin urged states to “use new technologies for the benefit of humanity” and “find the right balance between incentives for the development of artificial intelligence and justified restrictive measures.” He proposed states to “jointly come to an agreement on regulation that would exclude potential threats, and not only from the point of view of military and technological security, but also traditions, law, morality of human communication.”

REPORT FROM THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Ray Acheson | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

The world is an unequal place and being actively made more unequal by the day. This reality was firmly reflected and critiqued during the **UN General Assembly high-level “debate”**. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflict, and the climate crisis, government representatives highlighted inequalities in political economy, digital access, racial justice, and impacts of climate change and the pandemic, as well as in accountability and compliance with international obligations. Many considered the impacts of militarism on the lives of people around the world and urged **disarmament and demilitarisation** as essential to achieving the objectives of the United Nations.

While many governments issued strong appeals for change in order to overcome these inequalities, to a large extent the debate lacked the urgency that this moment in history should compel. Rising temperatures and sea levels are matched with rising fascism and isolationism; increased investments in weapons and war—including nuclear weapons—have directly resulted in divestment from peace, health, and welfare of people and planet and place all our lives in peril. *This is not a drill*. Yet despite the urgent calls for action, many of the countries in a position to help generate this change—foremost by changing their own way of doing business, whether in relation to fossil fuel consumption, militarism, immigration policies, or aid and debt—did not give a strong sense that they have the courage or the capacity to cooperate for meaningful change. Moreover, while strong critiques were levelled abstractly against those who have made the world so violent and inequitable, it was not clear that there is yet critical mass to effectively challenge the member states that are willfully undermining international peace, security, and justice.

Those governments that did speak with passion and vision need to collaborate now, with activists and others committed to building solidarity and care for all. We have no more time to simply demand better

from those who make the world more dangerous. We need to figure out how to build alternative paths to peace and equality. Multilateralism is key, but only to the extent that it is used to advance common goods, not cower to bullies.

Global inequalities surge

While many governments spoke positively of the United Nations' success over the past seventy-five years in maintaining international peace and security, several also offered critical reflections of the ways in which certain member states have undermined the organisation's object and purpose by exercising and enforcing these inequalities. **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**, for example, expressed concern with “the unevenness and contradictions of a lopsided multilateral system in which the norms and rules are conveniently applied and upheld in favour of the powerful.” Similarly, **Iceland** noted, “Too many seek to apply the principles and values of the UN Charter selectively, tilting the balance between rights and responsibilities.” In this context, the Icelandic foreign minister argued, “Our organisations and institutions should never serve or shelter those who seek to undermine the basic principles of the international rule-based order.”

Yet this is precisely the state of current reality. For the past seventy-five years, while the majority of UN member states have worked together to advance agendas related to development, gender equality, the climate, peace, and security, certain states have worked in the opposite direction—throwing their vast economic and military resources behind projects that entrench their power and privilege.

Militarism versus solidarity

Investments in militarism have grown astronomically, with current world military spending sitting reaching **nearly \$2 trillion** in 2019. The “might makes right” mentality has infected all levels of the

UN's work, enabling the most heavily militarised governments in the world to dictate terms to the rest of the world. At the general debate, the **United States** boasted about its role in manifesting this global system of extreme inequality and violence, stating, "We are stronger now than ever before, our weapons are at an advanced level like we've never had before, like frankly we've never even thought of having before."

With echoes of its racist and genocidal "manifest destiny" philosophy that the United States used to justify its slaughter of Indigenous populations and theft of land and water on the American continent, the US president told the UN General Assembly that his country is fulfilling its "destiny as peacemaker," but that "it is peace through strength". The outright positioning of the ability to commit massive violence, including with nuclear weapons, as the source of a country's strength conveys the embeddedness of militarised masculinities as well as a flagrant disregard for human life and international law. While the UNGA debate was still underway, the US government **asked** its military how quickly nuclear weapons could be pulled out of storage and loaded onto bombers and submarines, as some sort of dangerous power play with Russia meant to convey strength in negotiations over nuclear arms control.

In contrast, most other governments called not for more weaponisation or for "strength through violence," but for solidarity and care, for each other and for our shared planet. Quoting Nelson Mandela, **South Africa's president** highlighted the endurance of solidarity in building a common and inclusive future: "It is human solidarity, the concern for the other, that must be at the centre of the values by which we all live." **Costa Rica** underscored this relationship between solidarity and multilateralism, urging all governments to understand that there cannot be "individual or national welfare if there is no shared and global welfare."

Healthcare not warfare

Many governments also firmly criticised the waste of resources that militarism represents. **Cuba** lamented

that \$1.9 trillion is "being squandered today in a senseless arms race promoted by the aggressive and war-mongering policies of imperialism," while **Nepal** questioned what is more important in the midst of a pandemic: nuclear weapons or an accessible vaccine against COVID-19. "The world needs more masks, not muskets; more protective equipment, not destructive weapons; and more social spending to save lives, not military spending to destroy lives."

As **Ukraine** pointed out, "Coronavirus spares no one. It does not care whether the country has nuclear weapons or what is the level of its GDP." The **Costa Rican government** noted that the pandemic has clearly shown that the current definition and pursuit of "security" do not reflect true human security. It offered comparative statistics from the International Peace Office, "which estimates that the cost of a war tank could treat 26,000 people against malaria and that, with the cost of an aircraft carrier, an area larger than the State of Florida could be reforested. This is also equivalent to the size of Switzerland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium combined." Calling for a reprioritisation of expenditure and approach to global issues, Costa Rica urged "less weapons, more resources for development. More resources to fight the pandemic, more resources to counter the climate crisis, more resources for the Sustainable Development Goals. And less militarization and death. That is the true human security of the peoples."

Ecuador, the **Holy See**, and several others also critiqued the squandering of resources on militarism and urged disarmament as a critical to efforts for advancing peace and equality. Some states noted that militarism has brought us closer to the brink of extinction than ever before, with global tensions between heavily militarised countries once again on the rise and the treaty-based advancements made over decades coming increasingly under fire. "In this forum in which peace was sealed 75 years ago, I wish to express my concern about the dangers posed by non-compliance with disarmament agreements or the withdrawal of some parts, which may lead to the resumption of arms races that take us back to a time

when the world lived in the shadow of a possible nuclear conflict,” warned **Uruguay**.

Confronting nuclear weapons

Several countries raised concerns about the threat of nuclear war and of nuclear weapon possession, use, and testing. Such weapons “pose an existential threat to life on this planet and cause tremendous human suffering,” noted Austria, while Guatemala said they put “the continuation of life on Earth at risk.” The **Marshall Islands**, in which 67 nuclear weapon tests—authorised by the United Nations at the behest of the United States—were conducted between 1946 and 1958, said the lasting legacy of these tests has been a significant human rights challenge. “No other people should ever have to bear the burdens which we know from nuclear exposure,” said the Marshallese president. “Real results, not symbolic lip service, is needed to unpack and address the often complex situations which often accompany nuclear risk.”

Unfortunately, lip-service has been the dominant approach to nuclear disarmament over the past decades. Rather than working to achieve the elimination of nuclear arsenals, all of the nuclear-armed states have engaged in “modernisation” programmes. **Moldova** noted its concern with the “scale of the armament race” in this regard, as well as with “the persistent uncertainty of the situation related to the existing disarmament and control agreements of strategic armaments.” Despite all the **evidence** of the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons, the nine nuclear-armed and some of their allies continue to assert the “necessity” of nuclear weapons for international peace and security. The **Holy See** cited this as one of the main impediments to peace, noting that the theory of nuclear deterrence “creates an ethos of fear based on the threat of mutual annihilation; in this way, it ends up poisoning relationships between peoples and obstructing dialogue.”

This poisoning of relationships has meant that the nuclear-armed states brush off or even refute

their legal obligations and related commitments to eliminate their nuclear weapon programmes. **Costa Rica**, among others, criticised the selective approach to collective security, noting that nuclear-armed states “ignore or threaten to ignore the obligations emanating from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, while demanding them for others.”

This is part of the reason why the majority of countries negotiated and voted to adopt the **UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons** in 2017, as a way to positively to advance the stigma of nuclear weapons and help set the stage for their elimination. Several governments used the opportunity of the UN General Assembly debate to announce their support for the Treaty and to encourage others to sign and ratify it as soon as possible—including **Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Ireland, New Zealand, Nigeria, Palau, Peru**, and the **Philippines**, amongst others.

Some states also expressed their support for the **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)** with Iran, several of which also appealed to all parties to implement the agreement fully. However, while the **European Union** pointed out that the “agreement endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231 remains in place and for us there is no doubt that the sanctions lifting commitments under the agreement continue to apply,” some other countries demanded strict application of sanctions as initiated by the United States in violation of this agreement. Meanwhile, Sweden, Ireland, Japan, Costa Rica, France, and the Republic of Korea referenced peace and denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.

Weapons and war

While most arms-related comments focused on nuclear weapons, some governments highlighted other weapon and disarmament issues. A few delegations spoke, if tangentially, about **the use of explosive weapons in populated areas**. The **Holy See** noted that “conventional weapons are becoming less and less ‘conventional’ and more and more ‘weapons of mass destruction,’ wreaking havoc on cities,

schools, hospitals, religious sites, infrastructures and basic services needed by the population.” **Uruguay** highlighted the importance of defending hospitals and schools from attack and for the protection of civilians in conflict situations.

A few countries urged action against the development of autonomous weapon systems. **Austria’s intervention** on this subject was the strongest, with an appeal to everyone to “act now, before the survival of civilians in a conflict zone is determined by an algorithm and before all constraints laid down in international humanitarian law become redundant and decisions are taken by killer-robots without any human control or ethical concerns.” Noting that the development of “machines with the power to decide, who lives and who dies” is not science fiction, but fast becoming a reality, Austria recalled the UN Secretary-General’s remarks that autonomous weapon systems are “politically unacceptable and morally repugnant”. In this context, Austria announced that it will organise an international conference in Vienna next year to address this urgent issue and invited all states to participate.

For the first time, issues related to cyber security and digital access and accountability was a prominent issue at the general debate. Many governments spoke with concern about the risk to human rights, privacy, and security in the online world—**Latvia**, for example, highlighted the “considerable threat to personal freedom” posed by data collection, digital tracing, and profiling. Other states urged more concerted action to prevent militarisation and conflict in cyber space. **Liechtenstein** noted that the provisions of the UN Charter governing the use of force are clear, “but they are increasingly diluted in practice,” which “is particularly dangerous in an era of increased militarization and of cyberwarfare.”

Ceasing fire

While concerns grow in relation to advanced technologies of violence, small arms and light weapons continue to wreak havoc around the

world. Several delegations raised concerns with the international arms trade and arms trafficking; governments of African countries in particular urged more action to prevent human suffering in relation to conventional weapons. Several countries indicated support for the African Union’s “**Silencing the Guns**” initiative, while a handful highlighted the **Arms Trade Treaty** as an essential tool for stemming the flow of weapons. **Trinidad and Tobago** described it as “indispensable in addressing the menace of the illicit arms trade.”

It was in the context of preventing human suffering from conventional weapons that UN Secretary-General António Guterres **reiterated** his call for a global ceasefire, urging all parties to armed conflict to lay down their arms before the end of the year. While he acknowledged that “enormous obstacles stand in the way: deep mistrust, spoilers and the weight of fighting that has festered for years,” he also expressed hope that even where conflict is raging, people will not give up the search for peace.

The vast majority of states addressing the debate indicated their support for a global ceasefire, with several governments issuing appeals for it to be made permanent. Others referenced specific countries or regions where a cessation in hostilities—and weapons supplies—is needed, including Libya, Yemen, Syria, and the Sahel. **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** raised concerns about each other’s military build-ups and arms imports, and Armenia stressed its “unequivocal support” to the global ceasefire appeal; yet **fighting renewed** between the two countries in Nagorno-Karabakh on 27 September.

Some states expressed concern, as **Germany** did, that the ceasefire appeal has not been heard or has been ignored, while others have expressed concern with the abysmal way the UN Security Council has handled the situation. **Luxembourg**, for example, noted the Council’s long delay in supporting the ceasefire appeal and pointed out that the obstacles encountered in this process are unfortunately emblematic of the Council’s difficulty in mobilizing and deciding, even in the most urgent situations.”

Security Council abolition

This critique was not in isolation. A number of statements addressed the exclusions, inequities, and political gamesmanship exercised by the UN Security Council. **Ireland** expressed concern with the repeated abuse of the veto at the Council over recent years, which has prevented “the Council from taking necessary actions, including on access to vital humanitarian relief and in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.” **Iceland** called on the Council’s permanent members in particular to “act in accordance with the UN Charter, instead of being motivated by narrow political gains in a zero-sum game,” while

Cuba argued that their violations of the UN Charter perpetuate “an unequal, unjust and anti-democratic international order where selfishness prevails over solidarity and the mean interests of a powerful minority over the legitimate aspirations of millions of people.”

Such concerns and criticisms have driven calls for UN Security Council reform, including expanding its permanent membership—particularly to include a representative from the African continent—or eliminating the veto of its permanent members. However, as a **new WILPF report** on the conduct of UN forums during the pandemic argues, the Council has continued to demonstrate “that it is beyond ineffective; it is actively harmful to the UN principles of cooperation, inclusion, and equality, as well as to achieving and sustaining international peace and security.” The report notes, “Discussion as to its reform has failed to make progress. It is time for those states that adhere to international law and multilateralism to restore the UN to the Charter. This means removing the power of the Security Council and effecting its dissolution.”

While that may sound exceptional, it is a long time coming. Governments are also beginning to think outside the box when it comes to the Council, with some calling now for transformation rather than reform. **Costa Rica**, for example, has suggested the replacement of the Security Council with a

Human Security Council, which it envisions as a “more democratic, representative, accountable and transparent” body that “examines the root causes of conflict and not just its symptoms;” that “creates incentives to transfer human and economic resources of the world towards development and peace and not towards the war industry. A Council capable of overcoming its deep internal divisions to work together and with one voice.”

Investing in conflict prevention

Whether UN member states choose to transform or abolish the Security Council, it is clear from the overwhelming consistency of statements at this year’s debate that there is an appetite for investments in conflict prevention instead of conflict; in diplomacy and disarmament instead of militarism and aggression.

Sierra Leone urged “collective engagement in the prevention of conflict as well as advancing durable peaceful settlement of conflicts and disputes,” calling on states “build on gains made in our preventive diplomacy efforts.” The **Czech Republic** argued that “effective conflict prevention and mediation are essential tools” for the promotion of international peace, while Uruguay urged states to “bet on dialogue and negotiation,” and to “find solutions to current conflicts that contemplate the rights of all parties.” For this, **Uruguay** said, “we need to redouble our commitment to preventive diplomacy and mediation as conflict prevention” and we need “a United Nations that acts more in coordination, both in discourse and in practice.

Speaking against the backdrop of a global pandemic, the appeals for cooperation and coordination have a renewed urgency. **Romania** appealed to fellow governments to “transform this crisis into a new opportunity and to revitalize the security and peace agenda, with a strong emphasis on conflict prevention and the consolidation of peace processes,” as well as “greater integration of the principle of the responsibility to protect in actions and projects focused on prevention.”

Improving transparency and access

Transparency, accessibility, and accountability of the multilateral system is vital to any such projects. Yet few governments addressed the issue of civil society access. Among the few who did was **Luxembourg**, which noted that the COVID-19 crisis “has exacerbated the temptations to curtail public freedoms beyond what was necessary” and to shrink space for civil society in many forums. Luxembourg announced that “involving civil society in United Nations forums will be one of the priorities” of its candidacy for the Human Rights Council next year.

The points about freedoms and rights of people around the world is an important one—and it is an issue that a gathering of all governments of the world should be addressing first and foremost. The world is on fire—it is literally burning, thanks to the pursuit of capitalist accumulation through

displacement, dispossession, and destruction of people and planet. “We cannot continue to attend meetings to discuss solutions within the current framework,” argued **Saint Lucia**. “We must first agree that the global economic development architecture has to change.” Several countries called for debt cancellation by the international financial institutions and bilateral creditors, arguing these debts preclude the achievement of global quality.

These debts are rooted in colonialism: richer countries have extracted resources and value from the world and have poured carbon into the atmosphere, and now loan money to those they have exploited in order to gain. The inequalities manifested through the colonial system mean suffering for millions of people today. Now, we are simultaneously suffering from a global pandemic; a climate crisis; nuclear weapon modernisation and potential use; horrifying armed conflicts; rising



Image © Dimity Hawkins

fascism, intolerance, and inequality. Yet so few statements contained the courage or conviction necessary to confront let alone overcome these challenges.

The imperative of disarmament, demilitarisation, degrowth

Spain was one of the few governments to acknowledge just how much our so-called leaders have let us down. “In most parts of the world, when young people look around them, they can see no life opportunities,” noted the Spanish president. “Instead, they see that the doors to progress and personal advancement are closing; they are seeing the environment deteriorating before their very eyes.” He noted that the virus of “disappointment, ennui, distrust and indifference” infects young people “every time we allow a new dispute to come between us; every time we renege on an agreement; every time we turn our backs on our commitments and responsibilities to other countries.”

To inoculate against these “insidious developments,” Spain said all governments are morally obliged to act, to prevent condemning young people from a hopeless future, to understand that the socioeconomic order has been disastrous. “We cannot continue to aspire to rampant, unnatural growth. We cannot build a world based on the destruction of guaranteed public services or of the environment in which we live. We cannot continue to nurture the fiction of a progress that only means greater injustice and inequality for millions of human beings.”

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) likewise lambasted the current world order and the “business as usual” attitude conveyed by so many—particularly since “business as usual” has already led to so much death and suffering around the globe. Noting the rise in nationalist isolationism and the building of walls, SVG urged countries to instead build bridges and to disarm. “The complex challenges of the 21st century will not be solved by military means or by a quest for hegemony,” said SVG’s prime minister warned. “While those who sell weapons have been

traditionally positioned to broker peace, we cannot expect to use outdated tools to address effectively contemporary exigencies.” Likewise, **Italy** called for reinvestment in politics, diplomacy, dialogue, and international law over militarism. “We should do so not only to fulfill our natural aspirations toward peace, but because history—the most recent even more so than earlier chapters—shows that the recourse to arms is not sustainable nor lasting.”

As UN member states conclude the General Assembly debate, it is clear that they need to take serious action immediately if they want to preserve multilateralism—not just as a system or method of operation within the United Nations, but as a principle necessary for the achievement of international peace and security. While the most militarised governments in our world continue to put their interests above those of our collective needs and our shared planet, the majority of UN member states need to stand up together, now, and build structures, forums, and processes that work for the rest of us, placing at the forefront disarmament, conflict prevention, solidarity and equality, and mitigating the climate crisis through green, degrowth politics.

Reaching Critical Will has extracted all references to disarmament- and militarism-related issues in a [country-based index](#).

REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PEACE

Allison Pytlak | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

On 21 September 2020, the United Nations (UN) commemorated its 75th anniversary with a **high-level event**. Its theme was “The Future We Want, the UN We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism”. While the event was in many ways a positive retrospective of the institution’s achievements to date, virtually all speakers stressed that this anniversary is taking place at time of great fragility. Most called for a dramatic shift in global and national priorities in order to survive the next 75 years.

The event featured opening plenary with remarks from **UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres**, and the (all male) presidents of the **Security Council**, the **Economic and Social Council**, and the **International Court of Justice**, as well as **youth representatives** from Ghana, Malaysia, The Bahamas, and France. It was presided over by Ambassador **Volkan Bozkir**, President of the General Assembly. The panel was then followed by pre-recorded video statements from heads of government and ministers of more than 100 countries. The 12-hour event concluded due to time constraints with around 50 national video statements undelivered.

Significantly, states adopted a political declaration during the event, which had been mandated by a General Assembly **resolution** agreed to in June 2019. The declaration text was negotiated and informally agreed to by UN member states through an intergovernmental and largely virtual consultation process over the preceding months, facilitated by Qatar and Sweden.

The declaration includes a reaffirmation of the original goals of the United Nations while also identifying new priorities and pledging to advance progress in other areas. This includes placing women and girls at the centre of its work in all areas; protecting the planet; working with youth and increasing partnerships; “upgrading” the UN; digital cooperation; promoting peace and preventing

conflict; and finally, leaving no one behind and “building back better” from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of those priorities were identified as part of an eight-month long global consultation, described by the UN as its “most ambitious effort to date to understand expectations of international cooperation and of the UN in particular. It is also the largest survey to date on priorities for recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.” Over one million people participated in UN-organised surveys and dialogues, the results of which were launched as part of the event through the **UN75 Report** and reflected in a **video** shown at the event

Maintenance of peace and “security”

The United Nations was founded, as nearly all speakers reminded, “amid the ashes of World War II” and in the hope of preventing such destruction and conflict in the future. The maintenance of peace and security is one of the organisation’s three pillars, along with socio-economic development and the promotion of human rights. It is within the peace and security pillar that the UN’s work on disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation has traditionally been based—although true security cannot be achieved through such an artificial siloing of needs and actions.

It is this thinking that underpins **Article 26 of the UN Charter**, which calls for the “least diversion for armaments of the world’s human and economic resources”. In this vein, the video message from Costa Rican president Carlos Alvarado Quesado, stated “The time has come to honor Article 26 of the Charter. [This is] a commitment that is breached year after year, as world military spending increased to \$1.9 trillion in 2019, the highest level since the end of the Cold War.”

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will cost the world between \$2 and \$3 trillion more

per year, as President Quesado pointed out. “Half of which would be available just by dispensing with absolutely unnecessary military spending forever. But unlike military spending, what is invested in these goals will help ensure security, human rights and the consolidation of just, peaceful and inclusive societies.”

Qatar, Peru, Kazakhstan, Liechtenstein, Austria, Cuba, Greece, and Russia on behalf of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) reinforced that disarmament or non-proliferation or arms control must continue to be priorities for the UN. Some made specific reference to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, while the president of the UNSC included illicit arms trafficking in his list of current challenges facing the global community. Italy and Kazakhstan described the dangers of the new arms race; Cuba referenced in particular the arms race that the United States has created. Egypt stated that it is committed to the complete elimination of weapons of mass destruction and the development of rules to ensure cyber and information security. Numerous statements highlighted concern about the growth of cybercrime and/or the importance of digital security, as well as digital inclusivity.

Others, like Cyprus and France, expressed that that UN has done well in the area of disarmament and non-proliferation. France spoke positively of how the UN has grappled with nuclear and chemical weapons challenges and in its dealing with the International Atomic Energy Agency, for example. The CSTO referenced chemical terrorism and urged safeguarding the peaceful uses of outer space. The Republic of Korea, on behalf of MIKTA Group (an informal partnership between Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia) highlighted the success of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT was also promoted as an achievement of the UN during the video shown at the event.

In the most positive disarmament-related announcement of the event, Malta stated that it had ratified the ground-breaking 2017 [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#) earlier in the

day. This makes Malta the 45th country to ratify the Treaty and means that only five more must do so for it to enter into force.

Palau cited the TPNW as an example of what diplomacy can achieve. Among other things, the TPNW is noteworthy for its recognition of the unacceptable suffering of and harm caused to the victims of the use of nuclear weapons as well as through nuclear weapons testing. The deadly legacy of nuclear testing was referenced by Marshall Islands as well as Vanuatu on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum, which stated that despite the cessation of testing, its impacts have “left scars still visible today in the lives and livelihoods of the people of the Pacific.”

The scars of conflict and armed violence inflicted by other types of weapons were evident in the statements of countries such as Azerbaijan, South Sudan, Somalia, Turkey, Poland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine, among others. Some of these countries used the opportunity of their video message to name specific aggressors that they face or where conflict persists today, and others to point out failure and inaction on the part of the UN in preventing conflict. Afghanistan emphasised the urgent need for a ceasefire, while Georgia noted that the UNSG’s call for a global ceasefire “has not been heard ... yet.”

Shaping peace together

While there was not an especially high number of explicit references to weapons or disarmament in the video statements, their overwhelming plea for multilateralism, reprioritisation, and reform has direct bearing on work in this field.

In fact, the prevailing feeling from the 12+ hours’ worth of statements is that we are at a precipice. The converging crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and stalled progress on the 2030 Agenda are compounding the existing inequalities of a multilateral system that for too long has been dominated by the interests of a few, rather than the needs of many. “The cataclysmic crises of the

pandemic and climate change, layered upon a bedrock of inequality and festering conflicts, are fast upon us,” noted Foreign Minister Elrington of Belize, on behalf of the [Alliance of Small Island States](#). Indeed, the leaders of small island and/or developing states were explicit in describing not only the specific challenges they face, from rising oceans to lack of access to medical equipment, rising poverty, and economic hardship, but also in warning that change must happen—now. “When Brazil is in flames, when Sudan is underwater, when the largest iceberg has just broken off the Greenland shelf, what world are you leaving us?” asked Athan Méténier, an environmental and climate youth activist from France. “If action is not taken, a bleak 2020 will only be the beginning of tumultuous decades to come,” warned Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister of [Fiji](#). “Every nation, large and small, stands a better chance at our best future by acting in solidarity.”

These messages have direct bearing on peace, international security, and disarmament. Peace will not be possible when there is insecurity, and security cannot be had without peace—and neither are achievable amid the environmental, health, and economic challenges described in statements. Security must at last be redefined as health, safety, and human rights rather than about bombs, soldiers, and tanks. Yet multilateralism in many disarmament processes and forums is breaking down and being replaced by animosity, rivalry, and unilateral action. As already noted, global military expenditure is at

a new high; multilateral disarmament agreements are being discarded or violated; technology is being weaponised; and nuclear weapons are on “hair trigger alert,” as UNSG Guterres described. “We have a surplus of multilateral challenges and a deficit of multilateral solutions.”

The UN at 75 commemoration took place on the [International Day of Peace](#), which this year took as its theme “shaping peace together.” Shaping peace will mean working together, in ways that are inclusive and equal, and transforming the structures in which cooperation occurs. Amid the many concerns raised in statements during the event were those relating to inequality and uneven representation within UN system, and calls for reform. Speaking on behalf of the [Group of Least Developed Countries](#), the President of Malawi pointed out that the UN Charter begins with the phrase “we the peoples”—a reminder to the international community that people are the cornerstone of the organisation.

In its [Peace Day blog](#), WILPF calls on global citizens to imagine a different way of pursuing peace that does not lean on “corrupt and corruptible” systems of government, such as community organising and creating unifying spaces for change. “If we can move beyond the systems and structures that are so prone to breakdown, exploitation, and lack of cooperation, if we can take back the power that’s been taken from us, we just might stand a chance of ‘shaping peace together.’”



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REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE TOTAL ELIMINATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Ray Acheson | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

On 2 October, the UN General Assembly convened a high-level meeting to commemorate the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, an annual observance that takes place each year on 26 September. Due to COVID-19-related restrictions, most remarks were made virtually through pre-recorded video statements. Due to time constraints not all of the messages were aired.

The pandemic of nuclear weapons

With the COVID-19 pandemic as a backdrop to this year's event, several governments highlighted relevant lessons to be learned—including that transnational solidarity and investments in care, rather than in harm, are necessary pre-requisites for any hope for our survival. "COVID-19 should be a reminder that protecting humankind can't happen through nuclear weapons but through global solidarity," noted Indonesia.

Among others, Bangladesh, Austria, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, Ecuador, Iran, Ireland, Jamaica, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Panama highlighted the relationship between the global pandemic and the global conflagration that would accompany nuclear war and critiqued the ways in which nuclear-armed states are investing in mass destruction instead of working to prevent this human-made disaster-in-waiting. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) warned that just as it was difficult to prevent COVID-19 from entering our counties, the same will be the case with a nuclear explosion. "No one is safe if the world isn't safe," the DRC said, while Nepal noted that no vaccine will save us from a nuclear catastrophe.

The vanity of the bomb

Almost every country speaking at the event condemned the possession of nuclear weapons,

seeing them, as Costa Rica eloquently described, as "contrary to the survival instinct of our species." In a nuclear war, Equatorial Guinea noted, there are no winners—all of humanity will lose. The theory of nuclear deterrence is a fallacy, one that gives a false sense of security and superiority to the nuclear-armed armed. "Let's finally lay this myth to rest," urged Austria, pointing out that nuclear deterrence does not increase security but instead perpetuates a constant threat to peace and security. Congo underscored the irrationality of developing nuclear arsenals "just to satisfy the irrepressible ego and vanity of the all-powerful," while the Philippines described the current nuclear order as "madness personified," pointing out that nuclear annihilation will be entirely our fault, like leaving a loaded revolver in a child's room.

Speaker after speaker demanded the nuclear-armed states fulfil their nuclear disarmament obligations and commitments, calling for urgent action to prevent the catastrophe that can happen in an instant. The world is conflict weary, said Seychelles, exclaiming that we do not need another threat, yet nuclear weapons can destroy everything in a moment: "our presence erased, our right to existence—and that of future generations—denied. Nuclear weapons threaten everyone we love and value." Many Pacific Island representatives spoke about the impacts their populations have suffered from years of relentless nuclear bombing—some of which, as the Marshall Islands pointed out, were even sanctioned by the United Nations under UN trusteeship resolutions.

Even without being detonated, nuclear weapons are catastrophic. The resources invested in nuclear weapons take away from not just mitigating the impacts of the current pandemic, but also of the climate crisis, poverty, and conflicts that ravage our world. Quoting from recent statistics calculated

by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Costa Rica noted that every minute a total of \$138,699 dollars is spent on the production and modernisation of nuclear weapons. “In a world of finite resources, these numbers are immoral and unacceptable.” Several others urged the nuclear-armed states to redirect this money toward social and environmental goods, and to redirect away from violent competition towards peaceful cooperation.

“The world doesn’t need nuclear weapons,” pointed out the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS). “It needs a strengthened multilateral system.” Many speakers expressed concern with rising tensions among the nuclear-armed and their active dismantling of nuclear arms control agreements. This path, several argued, is inconsistent with any credible claims to being responsible states. As Antigua and Barbuda noted, it is disingenuous to promote multilateralism and international peace and security while concurrently stockpiling tools of mass destruction.

Prohibition to elimination

This is why the vast majority of states participating in the commemorative event welcomed the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). Among others, the President of the General Assembly, African Group, Arab Group, Colombia, Comoros, Equatorial Guinea, Kazakhstan, Mauritania, Mauritius, Nepal, Peru, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and South Africa highlighted the importance of the TPNW, with some explaining how it complements other international law on nuclear weapons. Bangladesh, Bolivia, Botswana, Ghana, Ireland, Kiribati, Lesotho, Malaysia, Malta, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Viet Nam highlighted that they have signed and ratified this Treaty, while the African Group, Antigua and Barbuda, Austria, Costa Rica, Cuba, DRC, Ecuador, Ghana, Maldives, Namibia, Nicaragua, Palau, PSIDS, Thailand, and Trinidad and Tobago urged all states to join it. Algeria, Cambodia, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Liechtenstein, and Timor Leste all announced that they are currently in the process of securing ratification of the TPNW.

As Liechtenstein said, elimination of nuclear weapons isn’t a policy choice, it’s a moral necessity. The TPNW is an essential part of achieving a nuclear weapon free world—and the creation of that world is essential to our survival. The pandemic has been described as a portal, through which we can create a new world; several governments picked up on that theme at the commemoration. Mexico, for example, said that it wants to help create a different world after the pandemic, not revert to the world we had a year ago. “Prohibiting and eradicating nuclear weapons” must be part of this new world, it said, while Jamaica agreed that nuclear weapons have no role in the future we need.

It feels, increasingly, like the world is crumbling around us. Like what we have built is falling down—not from natural erosion but because of deliberate, violent chipping away at the structures of peace, solidarity, and diplomacy that most of the world has worked painstakingly to create over decades. But those holding the axes are in the minority. We must remember this. They may appear imposing, they may be the most violent, have the most money, the most weapons, and be the most frightful. But the majority of us—with compassion, care, and credibility—can stand together and build something new.

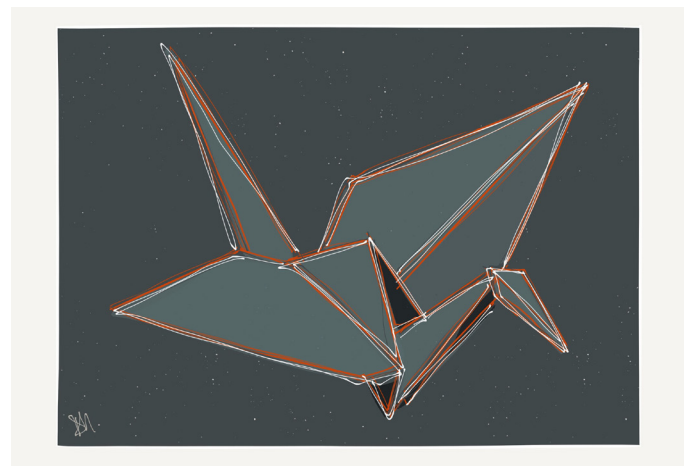


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MAKING SPACE FOR DIALOGUE ON NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Allison Pytlak | Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

The postponement of the 2020 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference due to COVID-19 was a disappointment for many, particularly given the symbolism of this year in which we have commemorated 75 years since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and 50 years since the NPT entered into force. Yet despite the setback to multilateral nuclear disarmament, the conference's delay has also presented new opportunities for dialogue and engagement.

Around 90 diverse civil society organisations endorsed a [joint statement](#) to NPT states parties published on 11 May 2020, the same day on which in 1995 the NPT was indefinitely extended. The statement was partially undertaken in lieu of being able to participate and communicate with states parties in a conference setting, but also to demonstrate that despite varying priorities and areas of specialisation, an overwhelming number of civil society groups share the same concerns about the dire status of the NPT—and about the need for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation more broadly.

Organisations coalesced around three core messages: 1) global support for the NPT is strong, but its long-term viability cannot be taken for granted; 2) the grave state of global affairs and the rising risk of nuclear conflict and arms racing requires new and bolder leadership from responsible states; and 3) those that resist change also say the “environment” is not right for further progress, but responsible actors everywhere are rising to the challenge.

“We’re not only at a pivotal point in the struggle against the fast-moving coronavirus; we are also at a tipping point in the long-running effort to reduce the threat of nuclear war and eliminate nuclear weapons,” the statement highlights. “Tensions

between the world’s nuclear-armed states are rising; the risk of nuclear use is growing; billions of dollars are being spent to replace and upgrade nuclear weapons; and key agreements that have kept nuclear competition in check are in serious jeopardy.”

The statement further provides analysis and recommendations for states parties in core areas relevant to Treaty implementation. Some of those are also being explored through a new online “critical NPT issues” event series organised by WILPF and the Arms Control Association (ACA). Three webinars have taken place since June 2020 that have brought in experts from academia, government, and civil society have shared their insights on complex challenges facing the NPT.

The first webinar explored the status of nuclear weapons modernisation programmes, and how that undermines NPT Article VI commitments. Many of the panelists had also contributed to WILPF’s annual publication [Assuring Destruction Forever](#), which is published in conjunction with NPT meetings and examines nuclear weapons modernisation programmes in all nine nuclear-armed states. A representative of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) also highlighted [recent research](#) on nuclear weapons spending, juxtaposed with the gaps in related spending on medical equipment and care.

The second webinar was an opportunity to explore in detail how the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is complementary to the NPT both legally and politically. This is particularly important as the entry into force of the TPNW is now imminent, with only around five ratifications still needed for it to do so, at the time of publication.

The most recent webinar invited three experts to consider the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

(JCPOA, or “Iran nuclear deal”)—current status, possible diplomatic pathways to salvage it, and how it affects dynamics among NPT states parties, including potentially at the rescheduled RevCon. Quite a lot of the discussion speculated on the impact of upcoming elections in both the United States and Iran, but also the larger context of disarmament and non-proliferation in the Middle East region, as an NPT issue and beyond.

Video recordings and remarks or presentations can be found on the [Events page of the Arms Control Association](#).

In advancing these initiatives, WILPF has sought to open up space for discussion and expression in ways that are not always possible during diplomatic meetings. We recognise the significant challenges that face the NPT but also the necessity of diverse and multi-stakeholder engagement to aid in resolving those challenges. This has always been true but is especially so at this time when more meetings are being held online, or in closed formats with reduced access and transparency, as our [recent report](#) highlights. If the NPT RevCon takes place in January 2021 as its president-designate has proposed, it will be vital that civil society can still act as the important stakeholder that it is.



[Download the First Committee Briefing Book 2020](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM 2020 FIRST COMMITTEE BRIEFING BOOK

To provide inspiration to delegates at First Committee, Reaching Critical Will has published a briefing book with background information and recommendations on some of this year's most pressing topics. The following are abbreviated recommendations from each chapter, focusing on actions that can take place during the First Committee. The full briefing book can be downloaded from www.reachingcriticalwill.org.

Nuclear weapons

- Express deep concern at the continued risk for humanity represented by the possibility that nuclear weapons could be used and the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences that would result from the use of nuclear weapons;
- Reiterate the unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-armed states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals to which all states parties are committed under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Article VI;
- Condemn nuclear-armed states' qualitative and quantitative advancement and modernisation of their nuclear arsenals;
- Call on nuclear-armed states to undertake nuclear disarmament, for some states to stop hosting other countries' nuclear weapons on their territories and for states to reject the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons on their behalf;
- Welcome the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in July 2017, call on all states to sign, ratify, and adhere to the TPNW, and note that the TPNW complements and strengthens the NPT as an effective measure as foreseen in NPT Article VI; and

- Include a reference to the TPNW in resolutions related to nuclear weapons.

Biological weapons

- Reaffirm commitment to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC) and the Geneva Protocol; and
- Report on measures taken to implement and strengthen BWC provisions.

Chemical weapons

- Highlight and publicly condemn any ongoing activities that are prohibited under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC);
- Defend the norm against chemical weapon use;
- Report on measures taken to implement provisions from the CWC and pledge financial support to relevant mechanisms and instruments.

Armed drones

- Recognise the ethical, legal, and humanitarian concerns that drones bring to the use of force in the contemporary landscape, and express a commitment to reducing and addressing harm and ensuring the protection of rights;
- Recognise the grave risk that international legal frameworks could be eroded through the use of armed drones, in the context of practices that challenge existing norms;
- Assert the need for transparency in the use of drones by any and all states, for the recording of casualties and the addressing of victims' rights, and for accountability and democratic oversight;

- Recognise the need for a broader multilateral conversation about what role drones should play in the use of force and the specific limits and standards for their use.

Autonomous weapon systems

- Acknowledge and support mounting calls to negotiate a new treaty to prohibit weapons systems that would select and engage targets without meaningful human control; and
- Express concern that the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) has been unable to meet in 2020 and highlight the need for urgent progress as well as consideration of other ways to prevent killer robots.

Explosive weapons in populated areas

- Acknowledge that the use of explosive weapons in populated areas causes severe harm to individuals and communities, including through both direct and reverberating effects;
- Endorse the UN Secretary-General's recommendation that states should avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects in populated areas; and
- Support the development of an international political instrument on explosive weapons to protect civilians.

Landmines

- Condemn any use of antipersonnel mines and reiterate that any use of landmines by any actor is unacceptable;
- Report on progress towards joining the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT);
- Promote the Treaty by engaging bilaterally in discussions on the universalisation and implementation of the MBT; and

- Vote in favour of the resolution on the MBT and encourage others, such as regional group members, to do as well.

Cluster munitions

- Condemn recent instances of use of cluster munitions;
- Report on steps taken to join the Convention on Cluster Munitions;
- Engage bilaterally in discussions on the universalisation or implementation of the Convention; and
- Vote in favour of the resolution on cluster munitions and encourage others, such as regional group members, to do as well.

Depleted uranium weapons

- Raise concerns over the potential use of depleted uranium (DU) in past and current conflict areas and the need for support to DU victims in regional and national statements; and
- Explain how they are implementing and possibly further developing A/RES/73/38 "Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium", in their national and regional statements.

Incendiary weapons

- Delegations should draw more attention to the humanitarian concerns of incendiary weapons and the need to strengthen international law. Raising the issue at First Committee would bolster efforts to address incendiary weapons at CCW, where most discussions have taken place to date;
- Delegations should call for a formal review of Protocol III of the CCW and amendments to address the negative humanitarian impacts of incendiary weapons; and

- Delegations should publicly condemn incendiary weapons use and urge states not party to accede to the CCW and Protocol III.

Small arms and light weapons (SALW)

- Support resolutions including gender-focused measures to prevent, curb, and eradicate SALW proliferation and violence, and work to ensure women's full and effective participation and representation in arms control programmes and diplomatic processes, including incorporating the results of the Fifth Conference of States Parties on the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), with its focus on gender;
- Present comprehensive reports on their progress on meeting their Review Conference commitments for the seventh Biennial Meeting of States on the UN Programme of Action on SALW;
- Emphasise the importance of addressing pervasive SALW armed violence, recognising that the vast majority of deaths and injuries due to SALW use occur in violence and crime, not in armed conflict;
- Strengthen the focus on achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 and respecting human rights law, international humanitarian law, and UN principles governing the use of force; and
- Prepare proposals to encourage states to exchange good practices on preventing, combatting, and eradicating the illicit trade in SALW and ammunition.

International arms trade

- Highlight and challenge arms transfers that contribute to human suffering;
- Recognise the impact of COVID-19 on armed violence and conflict;
- Encourage universalisation of the ATT;

- Acknowledge the gendered impact of arms flows and trade, and of conflict and violence, and engage in initiatives that promote gender equality; and

- Support the annual resolution that calls for strong and effective ATT implementation.

Outer space

- Re-establish consensus on a resolution to strengthen Transparency and Confidence-building Measures in Outer Space Activities (TCBMs) related to outer space activities;
- Advance proposals for concrete security measures for space systems by building on momentum linked to restricting military activities that intentionally create debris; and identifying specific responsible space behaviours and improving the understanding of intent to reduce the risk of conflict in space;
- Condemn any anti-satellite tests and the development of weapons to be placed in orbit or any system to be used to damage or destroy space-based assets;
- Pledge not to use any space- or ground-based capabilities, whether exclusively military or multi-use in nature, to deliberately damage or destroy space assets;
- Highlight the importance of preventing an arms race and the escalation of armed conflict into outer space;
- Indicate support for the negotiation of a treaty preventing an arms race in outer space and for practical voluntary measures toward that end; and
- Reiterate the status of outer space as a global commons.

Cyber peace and security

- Articulate views and priorities for the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) and Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on ICTs;
- Speak out against hostile and provocative actions in cyberspace and the militarisation of technology, and speak in favour of cyber peace, human rights, and human security; and
- Support the full inclusion of civil society in future meetings of the OEWG; mechanisms for input with the GGE; and any future relevant bodies.

Gender and disarmament

- Welcome the gender perspectives included in recent forums and documents, and commit to advancing the goals contained therein;
- Ensure that gains made on gender in the 2019 First Committee are maintained and expanded;
- Collaborate to make First Committee resolutions more gender-sensitive;
- Highlight the need to ensure gender and other forms of diversity in disarmament discussions and negotiations; and
- Share their experiences with ensuring gender perspectives in disarmament policies and initiatives.

Disarmament and development

- Recognise and reinforce the specific ways in which disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control can advance development, including the SDGs;
- Address the issue of the underrepresentation of lower-income countries and regions in multilateral disarmament forums, and suggest practical measures to correct this; and

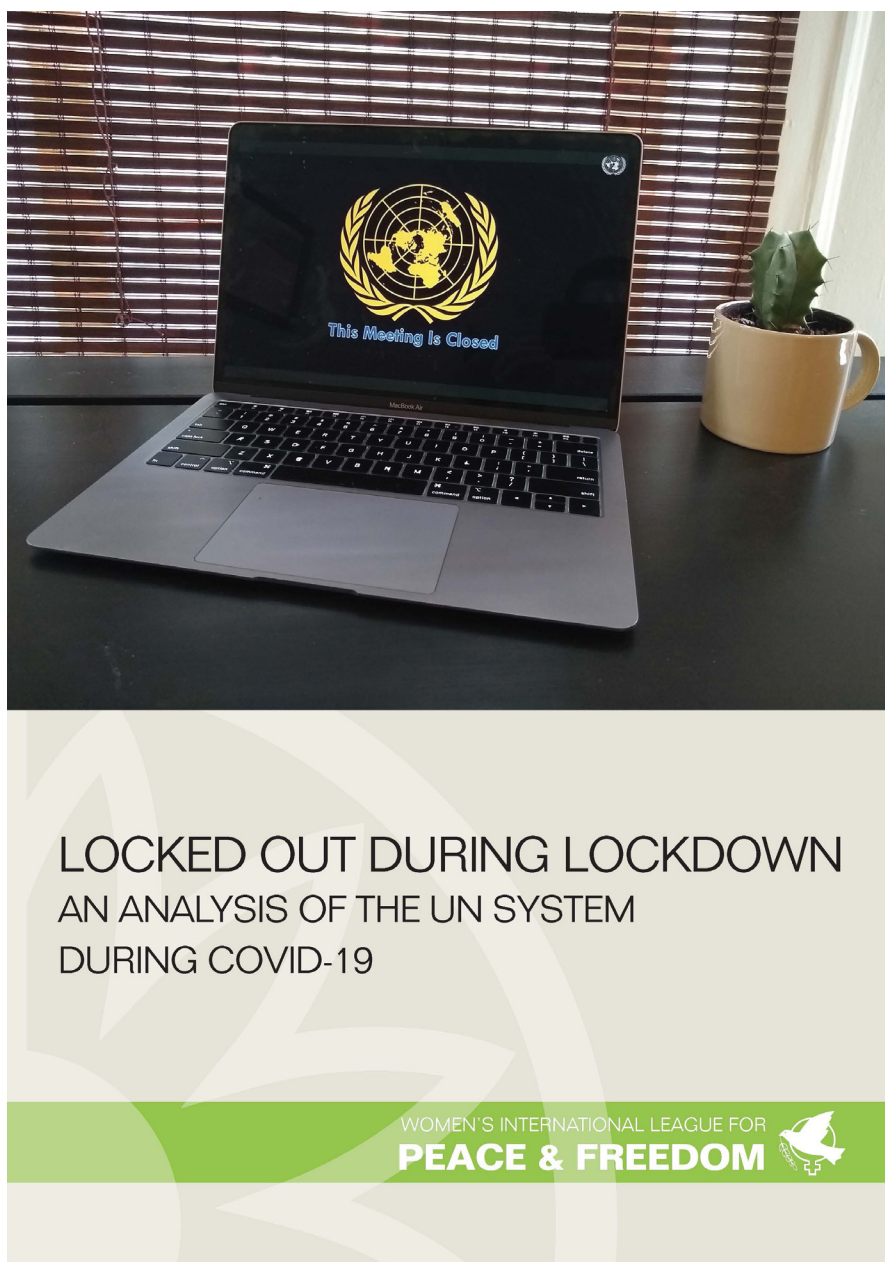
- Suggest new ways for the UNGA to effectively engage in this issue.

Protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts

- Support the developing of a normative framework on the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts by acknowledging and fully articulating the environmental dimensions of the topics they debate.

Disarmament education

- Support and strengthen the education resolution by engaging with the specific recommendations of the UNSG's Securing Our Common Future; highlighting the need for disarmament education to amplify the voices of survivors and youth; and addressing concerns raised by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Call on relevant actors to make submissions to the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) for the 2020 report by the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) on implementation of the 2002 study on disarmament and non-proliferation education; and
- Highlight the importance of disarmament education and its relevance to achieving SDG 4 on education and SDG 16 on peace and justice; honour the crucial role of hibakusha, survivors, civil society, educational institutions, and youth in disarmament education; welcome the UNSG's disarmament education actions in Securing Our Common Future, UNODA's Youth4Disarmament initiative and the inclusion of peace and disarmament education in the preamble of the TPNW; report on their government's peace, disarmament and non-proliferation education initiatives, including efforts to engage youth.



Our **latest report** provides an overview of the impact of the COVID-19-related changes in process and procedure at the United Nations, particularly in terms of transparency and accessibility to civil society. focuses on processes and forums related to disarmament and human rights, and covers briefly the work of the UN General Assembly, UN Security Council, and the Commission on the Status of Women, covering the period of March to mid-September 2020.

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The First Committee Monitor is a collaborative NGO effort undertaken to make the work of the First Committee more transparent and accessible. The Monitor is compiled, edited, and coordinated by Reaching Critical Will, the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

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Reaching Critical Will

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Reaching Critical Will is the disarmament programme of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organization in the world. Reaching Critical Will works on issues related to disarmament and arms control of many different weapon systems; militarism and military spending; and gendered aspects of the impact of weapons and of disarmament processes.

Reaching Critical Will is your primary source for information, documents, and analysis about the United Nations General Assembly First Committee and other multilateral disarmament conferences and processes.

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The views in this publication are not necessarily those of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom or the Reaching Critical Will programme.