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EDITORIAL: INVEST IN COMMUNITY, NOT COMPETITION

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

The UN General Assembly is meant to be about community, not competition. Community requires reciprocity, trust, and understanding. It requires us to live in relationship with others, not simply to demand that everyone else obey our commands or conform to our way of thinking. This is not easy to build, and even more difficult to maintain, but this is the only way we can actually achieve the objectives of the UN Charter.

During last year's session of the First Committee, delegates had to contend not just with the global pandemic but also with **hypocritical mudslinging** of the most heavily militarised countries in our world. While this is by no means new to veterans of the First Committee, some of the challenges mounted last year seemed particularly audacious in their determination to undermine international law. Meanwhile, accusations of belligerence and legal violations were bandied about, particularly between Russia and the United States, as if we were all trapped in some of kind violent tennis match in which point-scoring is based on gaslighting.

The gamesmanship on display last year was more than disruptive. It arguably represents the pursuit of Cold War-style hegemony by Russia and the United States over the norms and rules of disarmament law, but also the ways in which the United Nations itself operates on these issues.

Those who seek the preservation of their own power at any cost are determined to undo the norms, laws, and institutions we've already built, and to dismantle our means and methods of cooperation so that we cannot build any more. This is a death project. Twenty years after the initiation of the "Global War on Terror," from which violence and suffering have increased exponentially while weapon and "security" companies have profited immensely, we can clearly see what happens when we invest in militarism instead of peace.

And yet, the governments that have led us down this path continue to double down on this failed experiment with violence-as-power. The recent announcement by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of their intention to build a trilateral military alliance that includes sharing **nuclear-powered submarines** (in **contravention** of non-proliferation rules and norms) and constructing more **military bases** is just the latest example of the warmonger mentality that has driven global politics and economics for far too long.

This behaviour cannot be allowed to continue. It's up to the rest of the UN membership to confront those who are being disruptive, disingenuous, and destructive and to work together for an alternative future of care, justice, and equality.

That said, the institutions and laws we do have do not all deserve preserving. Many of them uphold social, political, and economic inequalities, rooted in capitalist extraction, environmental destruction, and border imperialism. Building stronger and better communities means undoing the aspects of the "global order" that foster violence and inequality, and constructing new institutions and norms with justice and solidarity at the core.

This work is possible. It means investing in care, not war. It means prioritising justice over power. This is the vision of a United Nations meant to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. As the world burns and melts around us, we have no time to waste.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 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. During the First Committee, delegates should:

Nuclear weapons

- Express deep concern at the continued risk for humanity represented by the continued possession and modernisation of nuclear weapons 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 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 relevant states to stop hosting other countries' nuclear weapons on their territories, and for all states to reject the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons on their behalf;
- Welcome the entry into force of the TPNW in January 2021; 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 their commitment to the BWC and the Geneva Protocol; and
- Report on measures taken to implement and strengthen BWC provisions.

Chemical weapons

- Strongly condemn any use of chemical weapons anywhere, at any time, by anyone, under any circumstances;
- Defend the norm against chemical weapon use;
- Report on measures taken to implement CWC obligations; and
- Pledge financial support to relevant voluntary funds maintained by the OPCW.

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; and
- 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 weapons

- Recognise that autonomy in weapons systems presents pressing moral, legal, and security concerns;
- Support the development of a legal instrument to address autonomy in weapons systems, containing:
 - » Prohibitions on systems that cannot be used with meaningful human control and on autonomous weapons that would target people; and
 - » Positive obligations to ensure that other systems can be used with meaningful human control; and
- Call for negotiations of that legal instrument to begin urgently.

The use of 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
- Express support for the development of an international political instrument on explosive weapons to protect civilians and intention to participate in the consultations in Geneva later this year.

Landmines

- Condemn all use of antipersonnel mines, including by Myanmar, and reiterate that any use of landmines by any actor is unacceptable and should be halted immediately;
- Report on progress towards joining the Mine Ban Treaty (MBT);

- Pledge financial support for the implementation of MBT obligations, including land clearance, provision of risk education, and assistance to survivors, their families, and communities;
- Promote the MBT by engaging bilaterally in discussions on universalisation and implementation of the Treaty; and
- Vote in favour of the First Committee resolution on the MBT and encourage others to do as well.

Cluster munitions

- Condemn all use of cluster munitions by anyone, anywhere and under any circumstances, including recent instances of use in Syria and the Nagorno Karabakh region;
- 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 so as well.

Depleted uranium weapons

- Continue to raise concerns over the (potential) use of DU in past and current conflict areas and the need for support to DU victims including their compensation claims; and
- Explain how they are implementing and possibly further developing A/RES/75/42 "Effects of the use of armaments and ammunitions containing depleted uranium", in their national and regional statements.

Incendiary weapons

- 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 the Convention

on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Review Conference;

- Call for a formal review of Protocol III and amendments to address the negative humanitarian impacts of incendiary weapons; and
- Publicly condemn incendiary weapons use and urge states not party to accede to the CCW and Protocol III.

Small arms and light weapons

- Demonstrate their commitment to the full and effective participation of women in the UN Programme of Action (UNPoA) process by ensuring parity in their delegations' leadership and composition, as well as their presentations;
- Support resolutions containing gender-focused measures to prevent, curb, and eradicate small arms and light weapons (SALW) proliferation and violence;
- Share comprehensive reports on their progress on meeting their commitments from the Third Review Conference, especially if they were unable to do so before the Seventh Biennial Meeting of States (BMS7);
- Ensure that any resolutions on BMS8 set a broad mandate for the meeting;
- Recognise that the vast majority of deaths and injuries due to SALW use occur in violence and crime, not in armed conflict; and
- Ensure that civil society is able to participate fully, whatever format is chosen for First Committee proceedings, with the presumption that meetings will be open as the default procedure.

International arms trade

- Support the resolution that calls for strong and effective ATT implementation;
- Highlight and challenge arms transfers that violate or appear to violate the ATT; and

- Utilise all opportunities to promote the universalisation of the ATT.

Outer space

- Highlight the importance of preventing an arms race and escalation of armed conflict in space;
- Re-establish consensus on a resolution to strengthen TCBMs related to space activities;
- Build on shared interests and existing commitments that restrict military activities that intentionally create debris;
- Condemn 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, to deliberately damage or destroy space assets;
- Indicate support for a negotiated treaty to prevent an arms race in outer space and for initial voluntary measures to that end; and
- Reiterate the status of outer space as a shared, global commons.

Cyber peace and security

- 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
- Articulate views and priorities for OEWG II, including for the full inclusion of civil society in its future meetings.

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 previous First Committees are maintained and expanded;

- Collaborate to make First Committee resolutions more gender-transformative;
- 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.

Protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts

- Ahead of COP26, draw attention to military contributions to the climate emergency and the need for meaningful pledges to transparently report on and cut military greenhouse gas emissions; and
- Commit to fully articulating the environmental dimensions of the topics on the First Committee's agenda.

Disarmament and development

- Recognise and reinforce the specific ways in which disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control can advance development in a way that promotes human and planetary well-being, equality, and justice;
- Address the issue of 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.

Youth and disarmament education

- Support the "Youth, disarmament and non-proliferation" resolution, strengthening it by:
 - » Incorporating recommendations of the 2021 Seoul Youth Declaration and 2020 joint civil society statement, particularly those regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion;

- » Drawing linkages between youth, disarmament, and other pressing issues such as climate action; and
- » Addressing concerns raised by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Call on member states, international organisations, civil society, and educational institutions to make submissions for the 2022 UNSG report on implementation of the 2002 study; and
- Highlight the importance of disarmament education and its relevance to 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; welcome UNODA's Youth4Disarmament initiative, and the inclusion of peace and disarmament education in the preamble of the TPNW; report on their government's disarmament education initiatives, including efforts to engage youth.



IN PURSUIT OF NUCLEAR JUSTICE AND DISARMAMENT

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

On 7 September, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) held an [event](#) to commemorate the twelfth International Day against Nuclear Tests, which marks the closure of Semipalatinsk test site in Kazakhstan on 29 August 1991. The site was used by the Soviet Union for hundreds of nuclear tests between 1949 and 1989, wreaking environmental damage and human harm. This pattern of harm is reflected everywhere in the world where the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, and the other nuclear-armed states tested their nuclear weapons. Most recently, a study on French nuclear testing in the Pacific, the [Moruroa Files](#), demonstrate horrific impacts and an historic failure to provide appropriate compensation or reparations for those impacts.

As the then-UNGA President Volkan Bozkir noted during his opening remarks, nuclear testing has been catastrophic for the environment, impacting sea levels and climate change, and has devastated and displaced communities. On behalf the UN Secretary-General, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu also highlighted the tremendous environmental damage from decades of nuclear tests, while the Executive Secretary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) Organisation agreed that “pain and anguish” is representative of the sad legacy of the era of unrestrained nuclear testing.

Learning from survivors

While that era may be over (for now and hopefully forever), the damage is far from over. It continues to gravely impact survivors and affected communities, who grapple today with the health and environmental consequences of nuclear testing. Sue Coleman-Haseldine, a Kokatha elder who was two years old when the British and Australian governments began testing nuclear bombs on her people's land, [explained](#), “There is so much cancer around my country, as well as thyroid disease, defects in

babies.... The impacts of the Maralinga and Emu Fields testing is still being felt today, over 60 years later.” She also noted that this testing was conducted in secret, and pointed out that now there is the threat of a nuclear waste dump on country, which she sees as “another form of radiation poisoning just waiting to happen.” Calling on all states, including Australia, to join the [UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#), Coleman-Haseldine said: “Just remember the future forever belongs to the next generations, and it would be great if they had animals to share with. It's up to us now to make sure that we finally put these destructive weapons where they belong—in the past.”

Danity Laukon, a former member of the Marshall Islands Student Association, likewise [explained](#) how US nuclear testing created harms in the Pacific region. The tests erased several islands, contaminated water and food, and burned people. Today, communities remain displaced and are fighting to heal from cancer, while the dome the US built to store radioactive waste from the tests is leaking into the sea. Combined with the effects with climate change, she argued, the situation is even more concerning. Nuclear-armed states must adopt nuclear justice, said Laukon, and show regard for those whose lives they altered with nuclear testing. “We don't want the tragedies of nuclear testing to be the stories we pass to our children,” she said. “We want to leave a legacy of peace instead.”

Outlawing nuclear weapon testing and possession

It was to help build this legacy of peace that in 2017, 122 governments voted for the adoption of the TPNW. This treaty outlaws nuclear weapons, and, along with the [CTBT](#), prohibits all nuclear weapon testing. The [entry into force](#) of the TPNW in January 2021 “gives reason for hope,” said Kazakhstan's president during the commemorative event. Countless other delegations, including the African Group, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),

the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), as well as Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Nigeria, highlighted the importance of the TPNW and urged all states to accede to it. Brazil described the TPNW as an “evolutionary leap for the non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament regime,” as it “significantly raises the moral barriers” against nuclear weapons.

Cuba highlighted the first meeting of states parties of the TPNW, currently scheduled for March 2022, as an important occasion to advance nuclear disarmament. This upcoming meeting also provides an opportunity for states parties to determine how best to implement the TPNW’s provisions on environmental remediation and victim assistance, which relate directly to the legacy of nuclear weapon testing. Indonesia highlighted the importance of these provisions, calling on nuclear-armed states to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The PSIDS called for justice for victims of nuclear testing.

Virtually all participants also called on all states to sign and ratify the CTBT, which has still not entered into force because it **requires** ratification by certain intransigent states, including the United States. The appeals to these countries to join have been repeated ad nauseum by the rest of the international community since the CTBT’s adoption in 1996 to no avail, which is why the states that negotiated the TPNW ensured that the final version of the agreement categorically outlawed nuclear testing along with all other nuclear weapon activities. As Austria noted, the majority of countries in the world did not want to wait any longer to work for a nuclear weapon free world.

Condemning dangerous and unlawful behaviour

Despite the growing body of international law against nuclear weapons, activities for their production and proliferation and preparation for use continue in all nine of the nuclear-armed states. The Western European and Other States condemned the nuclear tests conducted by the Democratic People’s Republic

of Korea (DPRK). The European Union, Germany, and others also condemned these tests and called on the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapon and missile programmes. Other delegations condemned all nuclear weapon tests and nuclear arsenals, with Ecuador noting that all tests cause grave damage to the environment and people, and all tests contribute to the development of a prohibited weapon.

In this context, several delegations, including Austria, Ecuador, Indonesia, and others, condemned nuclear weapon modernisation efforts, including through subcritical or other forms of testing. Indonesia urged all states to reject nuclear weapon modernisation and signal their refusal of this strategy, including the so-called nuclear umbrella states, which hold the same responsibility to achieve nuclear disarmament and foster good international relations. There is no worthy legacy arising from the use or testing of nuclear weapons, said Indonesia, no moral ground to possess nuclear weapons, and now, with the entry into force of the TPNW, no legal ground either. States should direct resources to deal with climate change, it argued, not misallocate them on an arms race.

Pursuing collective security through disarmament and climate justice

As **research** conducted by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has shown, the nuclear-armed states spent about 72.6 billion USD on their arsenals in 2020—increasing their allocation of funds to these bombs even in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. “While the pandemic has dominated public debate,” noted ASEAN during the event, “the dangers of nuclear weapons must continue to capture our utmost attention.” Highlighting “great power” rivalry, modernisation of nuclear arsenals, and tensions on the Korean peninsula as particularly disturbing, ASEAN argued that the continued existence of nuclear weapons “may increase the sense of security of a few but is truly harmful to the collective security of us all.”

As the PSIDS argued, the more than 2000 nuclear tests conducted globally have impacted the lives

of millions of people around the world, including in relation to economic development, environmental sustainability, and human rights. Communities remain displaced and continue to face restricted access to marine resources; intergenerational health impacts continue to be felt with intensity; radioactive waste is now exposed to rising sea levels; and contamination will impede progress to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), said the group.

This is why a collective approach to security is so imperative. The PSIDS highlighted its vision for a Blue Pacific as an ocean of peace. This goal is crucial in confronting climate change, which the legacies of nuclear testing compound. Nuclear justice, through recognition of harms, reparations to affected communities, and investments in environmental sustainability and climate change mitigation, is an important aspect of achieving collective security and building a safer world for all.

FOR THE TOTAL ELIMINATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Alicia Sanders-Zakre | International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)

The high-level meeting for the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, held at the United Nations on 28 September, featured more than 70 interventions calling on states to join multilateral nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation instruments and to abide by existing obligations to realise a world free of nuclear weapons. While states acknowledged that nuclear dangers remain high, there is also cause for hope. As Kazakhstan reminded participants, its closure of the Semipalatinsk test site 30 years ago shows that circumstances and strategic thinking can change rapidly for the better.

Nearly all states welcomed the recent entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in January 2021. Many, including Comoros, Malta, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Dominican Republic, called on states that have not yet done so to join the Treaty. Several states, including Guatemala, Ghana, Tanzania, Peru, Mongolia, and Timor-Leste announced that they are working to ratify the TPNW. Others, including Venezuela (article 2) and Ecuador (article 12), noted their implementation of articles of the TPNW, and several, including the Philippines, Ireland, Malaysia, Indonesia, Botswana, and Paraguay mentioned the TPNW's complementarity with similar treaties in the regime such as the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). Several states, such as Cambodia, Lesotho, New Zealand, and Jamaica, welcomed

the upcoming first TPNW Meeting of States Parties (1MSP) scheduled for 22–24 March 2022 and said they are eager to engage with other states for a successful meeting. Austria, which will host 1MSP in Vienna, enjoined all states to participate, regardless of their position on the TPNW.

In parallel, most states also welcomed that the postponed Tenth NPT Review Conference is scheduled for January 2022 and wished for a successful conference. Several states called on governments to implement past Review Conference agreements. Many states also welcomed the US-Russian extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in 2021 and the commencement of a strategic stability dialogue. Some states welcomed the convening of the conference on the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone in November 2019. Many states also called for the entry into force of the CTBT, particularly appealing to the remaining Annex II states that have not joined to do so. Several states referenced their membership in nuclear-weapon-free-zone treaties and called on other states to join.

While states like Lebanon and Nepal did reference the hope inspired by progress on some treaties, such as the extension of New START and the entry into force of the TPNW, there was general acknowledgment that the overall disarmament environment remains bleak.

In particular, many states, including Mexico and Cuba, called out the nine nuclear-armed states for **spending \$72.6 billion** in 2020 on their nuclear arsenals while the COVID-19 pandemic raged. The risk of nuclear weapons remains far too high and the humanitarian consequences of the use of any nuclear weapon would be catastrophic, states noted. Several states near where nuclear weapons were tested, including the Marshall Islands, Kazakhstan, Kiribati, Fiji on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum, Algeria, and New Zealand referred to the humanitarian legacy of this testing on people and the environment, and the leadership of affected countries in the face of this tragedy to advocate for the elimination of nuclear weapons. In this regard, Kiribati called on all states to adopt an action plan with steps to advance the provisions requiring victim assistance, environmental remediation, and

international cooperation and assistance at the upcoming TPNW 1MSP.

China and India were the only nuclear-armed states to make interventions. While dozens of states contributed to the meeting, **not all states** that had prepared statements were able to deliver them during the event, and neither of the designated civil society speakers were given the floor, although video statements from representatives of the **World's Youth for Climate Justice** and the **Official Youth Constituency of UN Climate Change** were later shared online. Costa Rica's representative Maritza Chan—who was not able to deliver her remarks about the feminist imperative for nuclear disarmament—**noted** that in total, there were only 13 women inscribed in the list of speakers out of 89 states.

BREAKDOWN OR BREAKTHROUGH? THE RELEASE OF *OUR COMMON AGENDA*

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

In 2020, United Nations (UN) member states adopted a **Declaration** to commemorate the UN's 75th anniversary. The Declaration contains 12 commitments that respond to a wide range of concerns and priorities, such as placing women and girls at the centre of all UN work; protecting the planet; working with youth and increasing partnerships; digital cooperation; promoting peace and preventing conflict; leaving no one behind; and "building back better" from the COVID-19 pandemic, as some examples.

To achieve progress on these commitments, member states requested UN Secretary-General (UNSG) António Guterres to "report back" before the end of the UNGA's 75th session "with recommendations to advance our common agenda and to respond to current and future challenges." Those recommendations form the basis of Guterres' *Our*

Common Agenda, released in September 2021, which was informed by consultations and inputs received over the last year.

"We are at an inflection point in history. In our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough," states the publication at its outset. It goes on to detail these two possible future scenarios. The "scenario of breakdown and perpetual crisis" describes additional deadly pandemics, destabilising inequalities, and an uninhabitable planet, citing troubling statistics in all these areas. The scenario of a "breakthrough and prospect of a greener, safer, better future" describes sustainable recovery, healthy people and a healthy planet, and trust and social protection, and manages to identify a few signs of hope in this regard.

Among the eight “high level tracks” outlined in the document, three bear relevance to the peace, disarmament, and international security issues covered by the UNGA First Committee. This includes a call for a “new” agenda for peace; outer space dialogue; and call for a Global Digital Compact. These are presented briefly below.

A peace agenda

“Peace is the central promise of the Charter of the United Nations and one of the principal global public goods the United Nations was established to deliver,” the Agenda notes. “In crucial respects, our multilateral architecture has succeeded: there have been no world wars and nuclear weapons have not been used in war for the past 75 years, while some of the greatest risks of escalation have been prevented.”

However, as it goes on to state, “Our collective peace and security is increasingly under threat as a result of emerging risks and dangerous trends for which traditional forms of prevention, management and resolution are ill suited.” Protracted conflicts featuring transnational networks and new actors; rapidly evolving weapons technologies; the undoing of longstanding agreements on nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and “lawlessness” in emerging domains of conflict like cyberspace, are listed as among current risks to peace and security.

In response, a “new agenda for peace” is proposed. The “**original**” agenda for peace was proposed in 1956 by then UNSG Boutros Boutros-Ghali. This new agenda is centred on six core areas; those most relevant to disarmament are described briefly below:

- *Reducing strategic risks* focuses on various non-proliferation and disarmament initiatives. Some specific suggestions include establishing stronger commitments for the non-use of nuclear weapons and a timeframe for their elimination; banning cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure and putting in place measures to de-escalate cyber-related risks and tensions; and establishing internationally agreed limits

on lethal autonomous weapons systems. It refers to the 2021 entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as “an extraordinary achievement” and “a step towards the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.”

- *Reshaping our responses to all forms of violence* considers that “large-scale conflict kills fewer people than other forms of violence” and notes that some forms of violence, including against women, can be early warning sign of insecurity. The proposal is for the new agenda for peace to address violence holistically through a multistakeholder effort.
- *Investing in prevention and peacebuilding* suggests a set of commitments which would “provide for the necessary resources for prevention.” Some of these commitments would be to reduce excessive military budgets and ensure adequate social spending; tailor development assistance to address the root causes of conflict and human rights; and to link disarmament to development opportunities.
- *Putting women and girls at the centre of security policy* would build on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and “its principles of prevention, demilitarization and equality.” The new agenda envisages a reassessment of how peace and security are defined, negotiated, and sustained, and advocates for women’s equal participation in related processes.

Protecting the global commons: outer space and online space

As outlined in the *2021 First Committee briefing book*, the “peaceful and equitable use of outer space is threatened by growing military competition.” This is reiterated in Our Common Agenda, albeit with a greater focus on the increased number of private actors and traffic in space than on the problematic actions of states and creeping militarisation. The Agenda points out that earlier agreements on and approaches to outer space security are becoming outdated, and that while progress in governance is possible, gaps remain.

The Agenda calls for “a combination of binding and non-binding norms ... building on existing frameworks and drawing in the full range of actors now involved in space exploration and use.” It suggests the development of a global regime to coordinate space traffic and the elaboration of new instruments to prevent weaponisation of outer space. More specifically, the Agenda makes reference to a possible multistakeholder dialogue on outer space in the context of the “Summit of the Future,” one of three “key moments” proposed in the Agenda and seeking high-level political agreements on peaceful, secure, and sustainable use of outer space.

The Agenda also shines a light on the multifaceted and burgeoning problems relating to online spaces. As it explains:

Governance at the national and global levels has not kept pace with the inherently informal and decentralized nature of the Internet, which is dominated by commercial interests. Serious and urgent ethical, social and regulatory questions confront us, including with respect to the lack of accountability in cyberspace; the emergence of large technology companies as geopolitical actors and arbiters of difficult social questions without the responsibilities commensurate with their outsized profits; exacerbation of gender bias and male default thinking when women do not have an equal role in designing digital technologies, as well as digital harassment that has particularly targeted women and girls and pushed many women out of the public conversation; and the use of digital surveillance and manipulation to influence behaviour and control populations.

In response, the Agenda urges the UN, governments, private sector, and civil society to come together to agree on a Global Digital Compact, as part of a Summit of the Future. Such a compact could promote regulation of artificial intelligence to ensure alignment with global values; provide people with options as to how their data is used; close digital divides; promote the application of human rights online; and address misleading content, among

other suggestions. While some of these issues are less directly relevant to the First Committee (and are framed as a direct appeal to the Internet Governance Forum, a separate body) others intersect with many of the more “traditional” weapons issues and certainly underpin the human security that disarmament seeks to achieve.

Many agendas, not enough results

Our Common Agenda is a dense read, coming in at more than 80 pages and consisting of multiple elements (commitments, proposals, tracks, key moments) that can be confusing to follow and understand, not least because many of them name and relate to existing tracks of work, activities, or agendas. Notably, there is no explicit reference to *Securing Our Common Future*, the UNSG’s Agenda for Disarmament released in 2018 (and bearing a close title to this new publication).

Many of the threats and problems that are described in Agenda resurface in different parts of the publication, or under different aspects of the original 12 commitment areas. Yet, this speaks to the highly interconnected nature of the crises facing our planet—and also why international cooperation will be vital to addressing them.

To move these many words off the page and into action, serious political commitment and support is going to be necessary. While this Agenda emerged in response to a Declaration that was endorsed by all UN member states just one year ago, it’s not clear to what extent all member states share a vision of the “breakthrough” scenario. An overview of statements delivered by world leaders during the high-level opening segment of the UNGA’s general debate (see elsewhere in this edition) speaks to states’ shared concerns, but also their differences—and in some cases, hostility. The publication ends by outlining a series of specific next steps and also with a strong focus on cultivating “networked, inclusive, and effective” multilateralism. “Ultimately what matters is results. We need multilateralism that is more effective in delivering on its promises and consequently is more trusted.”

HOPE AND HUBRIS AT THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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

Hope is not just about aspiration or longing. It is a motivation to act; a determination to change the world—and a commitment to doing so. Hubris, on the other hand, is the expectation that this change will never come, usually stemming from the arrogance of believing one is powerful enough to prevent it, or because no one else is powerful enough to enable it.

Hope or hubris. This dichotomous approach to international affairs—and the future of our shared world—was one of the key themes at the UN General Assembly [annual general debate](#) this year. It was reflected across all issues raised by delegations during the debate, from climate change to the pandemic to armed conflict to socioeconomic inequalities and more. It is a theme that resonates strongly with the [discourse on disarmament and militarism](#) at the debate, which underpins all of our work for demilitarisation and peace.

The edge of the abyss

The theme of the general debate was “building resilience through hope”. In his opening remarks, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said he has hope, arguing, “The problems we have created are problems we can solve.” But, he warned, “We are on the edge of an abyss—and moving in the wrong direction.” Outlining the litany of self-made challenges facing the international community—from climate chaos to armed conflict—Guterres pointed out, “Instead of humility in the face of these epic challenges, we see hubris. Instead of the path of solidarity, we are on a dead end to destruction.”

This is not hyperbole. Read the news or spend at the day at the UN and you're more likely than not to feel despair at the state of the world. “Previously, the Earth was whispering,” said Slovakia, “but now she is screaming that she cannot hold us any longer, that humankind is too heavy a burden to carry.” And while the impacts of our hubris are disproportionately suffered by the so-called global south, this will not

be the case forever. As the Maldives warned, “The state of environmental ruin small island states endure now, will without a doubt catch up with bigger nations sooner than later. There is no guarantee of survival for any one nation in a world where the Maldives cease to exist.”

The ingenuity and resources to solve these global catastrophes are there, and yet the governments of the world—particularly the richest and most heavily weaponised—appear more interested in power politics than problem solving. The remarks from so-called world leaders at the general debate did little to assuage any fears that we are accelerating towards destruction. While small island states rang the alarm bells about the risks to their survival; while people around the world live in cities and countries awash with blood, bombs, and bullets; while the many countries—whose development has been deliberately subverted to serve the interests of capital—are still waiting to receive lifesaving vaccines for COVID-19; the “military powers” and their proxies thumped their chests and delivered lectures about the world order.

Rhetoric versus reality

At the end of its remarks, the United States claimed to stand at the UN “for the first time in 20 years, with the United States not at war. We've turned the page.” Yet its ongoing drone strikes, special forces operations, and military presence globally through at least 750 military bases says otherwise. And while the US President's remarks to the UN General Assembly that its “military power must be our tool of last resort, not our first, and it should not be used as an answer to every problem we see around the world” are very welcome, it's not easy to accept these words at face value when the country's economy has become based on perpetual war.

Also at odds with these remarks is the reality of the new Australia-United Kingdom-United States

(AUKUS) military alliance, announced just before the general debate began. A wide variety of governments, analysts, and activists have criticised the alliance both for **perpetuating militarism** generally, and for **violating non-proliferation rules** with a nuclear submarine deal. Most view this alliance as an attempt by the United States to “contain” China, which it perceives as a rising threat to its already crumbling empire. During the general debate, the United States claimed that it is not seeking a new Cold War or a world divided into rigid blocs, yet continues to invest in building exactly such a world. And it is not alone in doing so. The rest of the permanent five members of the UN Security Council and many of their allies continue to invest heavily in militarisation, engage in wars and occupations that destroy and damage civilian populations, and accuse each other of violating the norms and principles of the world order built precisely to prevent more slaughter in the wake of the Second World War.

Russia argued that a “might-is-right” approach is being applied by other states. In asserting this, however Russia, like the US before it, failed to mention its own complicity in the dismantlement and violations of agreements that are meant to serve the interests of humanity. Both states have withdrawn from or violated a range of bilateral and multilateral instruments relating to disarmament and arms control, causing many other governments to appeal to preserving the “rules-based order” of international law and norms.

However, Russia questioned the legitimacy of the “rules-based order,” which it juxtaposed with international law. It argued, “There is no consensus among the leading powers as to the principles of the world order,” asserting that the rules-based order consists of norms developed by Western states behind closed doors, as opposed to international law that has been agreed by all. It accused these states of trying to manipulate the UN to promote selfish interests, without reflecting on its own actions to, for example, consistently **disrupt the UN’s work on disarmament**.

This dichotomy between the rules-based order and international laws is challenging within the UN context. The establishment or imposition of agreements reached among a subset of the international community seeking control sets up a power struggle with those left out of the decision-making and lends not to cooperation but to division. But many states seem to have a more holistic view of things, seeing the whole range of agreements (treaties adopted inside and outside the UN; bilateral, regional, and international initiatives; etc.) as useful attempts to collectively constrain militarism and violence and to protect humanity. Appeals to the “powerful” states to conform to a rules-based order are often not just about Western-imposed rules but about international law as well.

States on each “side” of this purported division undermine all these constraints, whether the agreements are developed behind closed doors or through democratic or consensus-based multilateral processes. The governments most embroiled in this debate each reject or violate critical legal instruments for disarmament and arms control, such as the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the Arms Trade Treaty, and so on. And just as Russia rejects the rules-based order, so do the order’s own proponents—such as Australia, which said rather ominously at the general debate, “We must reinforce a sustainable rules-based order ... while ensuring it is also adaptable to the great power realities of our time.” (The ellipses aren’t to mark the extraction of text, they are in the written statement to indicate, one supposes, a sense of grave importance.)

Living above the law

The problem isn’t as simple as rules versus laws. It’s that certain governments believe they live above the law—that they are exempt from anything that seeks to constrain their behaviour. This is the crux of the challenge currently facing the United Nations and the concept of collective security: when some members of the so-called international community reject the measures that have been agreed over time to ensure peace and equality; or violate these agreements

while claiming not to, with complete impunity; or refuse to allow new agreements to be reached that would safeguard humanity—what can the rest of the world do about? So far, there has not been an adequate answer beyond striving forward where possible, often without these states, and condemning the actions and policies that are leading us into peril.

Unfortunately, this means that for now, while the warmongers rage against each other, the world burns. But this situation is untenable, and most of the world's governments know it.

"Power rivalries are worsening, and armed conflicts are raging on almost every continent," warned Switzerland, noting that international humanitarian law and human rights are violated daily, sowing the seeds of future conflicts. In this context we face a choice, proclaimed Malawi, between "a future of good governance delivered through strong democratic institutions that safeguard human rights, uphold the rule of law, and maintain world peace," and "a future of corrupt and oppressive governments propped up by proxy wars between developed nations and enabled by a weak and undemocratic United Nations that serves the interests of its Security Council at the expense of its member states' development and inclusion."

To this end, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines appealed to the "metaphoric lions and lionesses" to "converse with each other meaningfully, rather than hanker for perpetual disorder, insecurity, and war." It noted, "they do not actually need to lay down with each other in joyous embrace; they ought simply to resolve their differences, whether ancient or modern; and compromise, where necessary and desirable, in the interest of all. But for the sake of humanity, let us drop the vaunted self-interests, the vanities, and divisiveness—real or imagined, and work together, for the better."

What would this look like? In part, it will mean overcoming the systems that perpetuate violence, tension, and conflict. It will mean abolishing the structures of violence—war and militarism foremost among them—that are leading humanity to its own

demise. This is, after all, the purpose for which the UN was created. Quoting the words inscribed on a wall near the UN building in New York, that "nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore," Zambia argued this is a call to action. In this same spirit, Mongolia urged for the "horrendous phenomenon called war" to be eliminated, calling instead for dialogue and diplomacy to prevail. But eliminating war means eliminating the profits of war. What else but the "savage capitalism" described by Nicaragua—the "insatiable attitude of accumulation at the expense of international peace, security and human life"—could keep us going down the path to our own extinction?

As the entire world strains under the pressure of the pandemic, the climate crisis, and socioeconomic inequalities, global military spending has continued to rise. "How will we explain to the next generation that while there was a raging pandemic in which vaccines were not available to all people, and an unprecedented climate crisis, the world invested more funding in weapons?" exclaimed Costa Rica. "How is this irrationality possible? The future is raising its voice at us: Less military weaponry, more investment in peace!" As Fiji declared, "If we can spend trillions on missiles, drones, and nuclear submarines, we can fund climate action."

Hope as action

Hope gives us reason to act. And act we must. We're told we can't change things. We're told that the system is unstoppable. This conceals, and exempts, those running the system from responsibility and accountability. But we are not helpless against the systems we have built. We have the means to enact change, we simply choose not to, as Barbados said at the general debate. "The world knows not what it is gambling with. If we do not control this fire, it will burn us all down."

Right now, we are at a precipice, in the midst of what Saint Vincent and the Grenadines described as "a parallelogram of unruly and complex forces" for which "fresh initiatives and directions are required; and transformational leadership is

needed, now more than ever.” The calls to action from most governments and people in the world must not go unheard. Abolishing war, disarming and demilitarising, dismantling the military-industrial complex: these are the actions that are necessary to not just save future generations from the scourge of war, but to begin to deal with the other crises we face.

Now is the time for action, and the UN is a crucial place for it. As the UN Secretary-General said, “This is our time. A moment for transformation. An era to re-ignite multilateralism. An age of possibilities. Let us restore trust. Let us inspire hope. And let us start right now.”

Report on specific disarmament and demilitarisation topics

The following provides an overview of references to disarmament, arms control, and weapons. A full accounting of such references can be found in our [online country-based index](#).

Nuclear weapons

Condemnation of the continued existence of nuclear weapons came through strongly at this year’s debate. With converging crises like climate change, the pandemic, and rising global inequalities and geopolitical tensions, many delegations reiterated the importance of the total elimination of nuclear weapons. Malaysia argued, “The development and deployment of nuclear weapons continues to be a threat to all mankind. Given the global health crisis, we find it disheartening that billions of dollars are being spent to maintain and modernise nuclear weapons, rather than on saving lives and livelihoods.” Nepal also criticised the arms race and modernisation of nuclear weapons, calling upon relevant states to “divert precious resources from military spending to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and lift the most vulnerable people out of poverty.” Similarly, Nicaragua said, “It is unacceptable that in the midst of this pandemic, weapons of mass destruction continue to be modernised, endangering the whole of humanity.”

Putting profit ahead of people requires “justifications” for the possession and modernisation of nuclear weapons, which is borne out through the widely critiqued theory of “nuclear deterrence”. As Austria pointed out, “We cannot increase our security by increasing our potential to destroy. And, most of all, by hanging on to the myth of nuclear deterrence. We need to eliminate these horrendous weapons of mass destruction.” Similarly, the Holy See argued, “The threat of nuclear weapons, possessed under the guise of nuclear deterrence, creates an ethos of fear based on mutual annihilation, and poisons relationships between peoples, obstructs dialogue, and undermines hope. Humanitarian and security issues require us to end the nuclear arms race and to undertake effective measures toward nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation and prohibition.”

Fiji pointed out that after World War Two, “world leaders saw unilateral action as kindling for another world war, one fought with nuclear weapons of planet-destroying potential,” noting that to prevent this they built the multilateral system. Nuclear disarmament is part of the origin story of the United Nations, yet progress to this end has been prevented by the nuclear-armed states for decades. Further, the UN has in the past been complicit with the perpetuation of the nuclear age. The Marshall Islands highlighted that the UN Trusteeship Council specifically authorised nuclear detonations. “This was part of a wider nuclear weapons testing program of 67 atmospheric tests conducted by the United States as administering authority” of the Marshall Islands, between 1946 and 1958, which delivered “the equivalent of 1 .6 Hiroshima-sized shots every day, for 12 years.”

The legacy of these tests, noted the Marshall Islands, “remains a very contemporary threat—in our waters, our lands and our bodies.” It announced that it recently formed a National Nuclear Commission to coordinate effective responses through a human rights lens. “We tirelessly underscore that no people or nation should ever have to bear a burden such as ours, and that no effort should be spared to move towards a world free of nuclear weapons and nuclear risk, through any and all effective pathways.”

To this end, the UN Secretary-General called for progress on nuclear disarmament and Zimbabwe for the realisation of a world free of nuclear weapons. Kazakhstan urged the nuclear-armed states to commit to the complete elimination of nuclear weapons by 2045, which will be the centennial of the United Nations. Guatemala called for “complete, irreversible, and transparent disarmament” and condemned “any nuclear test or threat of the use of force with this type of weapon, which put at true risk and endanger the continuity of life on our planet.” New Zealand highlighted the “tireless efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons and the spectre of a conflict that no one can recover from.”

A number of delegations, including Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Holy See, Ireland, Malaysia, Nicaragua, San Marino, Thailand, and Zambia, highlighted the significance of the entry into force of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and urged all states to join the Treaty. Austria looked forward to the First Meeting of States Parties, which it is scheduled to host in Vienna in March 2022. Nigeria said it will participate actively in this meeting.

Unfortunately, as Croatia noted, nuclear weapons “still loom large in the security calculus of leading global powers.” It urged the avoidance of “nightmare scenarios” through commitment to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Other states, including Holy See, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Norway, Sweden, and Thailand, highlighted the importance of the NPT and/or its upcoming Review Conference. Australia said it will “always honour” the NPT, despite the violations of the Treaty posed by the recently announced agreement to acquire US nuclear powered submarines, which is part of the AUKUS military alliance noted above.

Arms control

AUKUS is only the latest in a long line of actions that have undermined international arms control. The situation has become so dire that much of the UN’s work on disarmament seems focused these days on appealing to the major weapon possessors and users to stop tearing down the international

norms and laws that have built since World War Two. “In an era of intensifying great-power competition and rapid technological progress, we are also faced with a serious risk of a new arms race,” warned Finland. “If the unravelling of the international arms control system is allowed to continue, it reduces predictability and increases the likelihood of unintended escalation.” Similarly, Montenegro highlighted the significant pressure on the international architecture for disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control, including from modernisation of weapon systems and the collapse of important agreements. In this context, Oman called on all UN member states “to fulfil their commitments undertaken through treaties and agreements related to disarmament, in particular, those agreements and treaties relating to nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, in order to ensure global stability.”

The United States pledged to “uphold the longstanding rules and norms that have formed the guardrails of international engagement for decades,” including “support for arms control measures that reduce the risk and enhance transparency.” While refuting the overall concept of a rules-based order, as noted above, Russia purported to be holding up established arms control agreements. It said that after the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, it “made a unilateral commitment not to deploy land-based intermediate-range or short-range missiles, both nuclear and non-nuclear, in regions where no similar US-made weapons would appear.” It also said it is waiting for a reciprocal moratorium from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, reinforced with mutual verification measures.

Russia also noted that “great expectations are also linked with the prospect of the Russian-American dialogue on the future of arms control,” highlighting the extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) without any preconditions and the joint presidential statement reaffirming that there can be no winners in a nuclear war and one must never be fought. Finland, Norway, and Sweden welcomed the extension of New START, and called

for further dialogue and cooperation. France called for a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to set out a joint action programme, including in relation to arms control and collective security, while Japan urged all countries “to make sincere efforts in a transparent manner in international arrangements on arms control and disarmament.”

Some delegations also highlighted regional arms control efforts, with Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, calling for the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. Kuwait noted that it will preside over the second session of the conference to establish this zone in November 2021.

Peace and denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula

Another key regional issue remains the process for declaring an end to the war on the Korean Peninsula, establishing a peace agreement, and achieving denuclearisation. The Republic of Korea (ROK) emphasised the importance of formally ending the Korean War with an end-of-war declaration, which will help create a new order of reconciliation and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and help foster denuclearisation. It proposed that the two Koreas, the United States, and China come together and declare that the war on the Korean Peninsula is over. “When the parties involved in the Korean War stand together and proclaim an end to the War,” said ROK President Moon Jae-in, “I believe we can make irreversible progress in denuclearization and usher in an era of complete peace.”

The United States said it seeks “serious and sustained diplomacy to pursue the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” and that it is looking for “concrete progress toward an available plan with tangible commitments that would increase stability on the Peninsula and in the region, as well as improve the lives of the people in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), however, argued that US militarism and hostile policies towards the DPRK is what is preventing peace and denuclearisation.

It noted that almost 30,000 US troops are stationed in the ROK, “maintaining a war posture to take military action against the DPRK at any moment.” The DPRK also highlighted joint US-ROK military exercises; US military spending on supersonic weapons, long-range precision-guided armaments, intercontinental ballistic missiles, strategic bombers; ROK development and acquisition of modern weapons; all as binding the ROK “with the chains of military alliance,” which is what prevents an end of the Korean War.

Meanwhile, Japan condemned the recent ballistic missile tests by the DPRK as a violation of UN Security Council resolutions. It called on the DPRK to engage in diplomatic efforts to progress denuclearisation, and said it would continue to seek to normalise its relationship with DPRK. Sweden called on the DPRK to “adhere to its international obligations and take steps towards denuclearisation.”

Nicaragua condemned “the US hegemonic political aggressions against the peaceful settlement of conflicts, including in relation to the DPRK, while Cuba opposed the sanctions against DPRK. Costa Rica advocated for a nuclear-weapon-free Korean Peninsula and urged the parties to “build peace, stability, and security together.”

Iran’s nuclear programme

The status of Iran’s nuclear programme and the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) also received some attention at the debate. Iran reiterated that the production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons is “forbidden based on the religious decree by His Eminence, the Supreme Leader.” It said that the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and imposition of “maximum pressure” on Iran has failed, but noted the policy of “maximum oppression” remains. Iran demanded all parties comply with the JCPOA and called on the US to lift its sanctions.

Cuba and Nicaragua opposed the sanctions against Iran, and Nicaragua further noted that the JCPOA “demonstrates that dialogue and diplomacy

are the most appropriate means for peaceful resolution, as an essential part of the functioning of multilateralism.” Qatar similarly argued “there is no solution to the disagreements and differences in viewpoints with Iran except through rational dialogue based on mutual respect.” It argued that this “also applies to the issue of returning to the nuclear agreement with Iran. I do not think that anyone has an alternative to this approach, even those who oppose reverting to the agreement.”

Several others echoed support for the JCPOA, with Russia calling for “the soonest possible resumption of the full implementation of the JCPOA on settling the situation around the Iranian nuclear programme” and Croatia arguing that “reviving the Iran nuclear deal is a key instrument of regional security and stability that can still serve as a useful platform for broader regional dialogue.”

The United States said it “remains committed to preventing Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon” and that it is working with the P5+1 to “engage Iran diplomatically and seek a return to the JCPOA. We’re prepared to return to full compliance if Iran does the same.” Bahrain reaffirmed its support for “international efforts aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring the ability to develop a nuclear weapon” and called on Iran “to fully cooperate with the IAEA to ensure the maintenance of regional and international security and stability.” Germany said it is ready to renew the JCPOA and called Iran “to return to serious negotiations as quickly as possible.”

Saudi Arabia said it is “very concerned at Iranian steps that go counter to its commitments as well as daily declarations from Iran that its nuclear program is peaceful.” Czech Republic argued that “Iran’s continued escalation of nuclear activities far beyond its commitments coupled with the suspension of the implementation of transparency measures under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action raises serious concerns. All these actions impede the execution of the IAEA’s verification and monitoring mandate.” France asserted that “Iran cannot be allowed to think time is on its side, because the more dangerous its nuclear programme becomes, the greater the

risk of a major crisis.” France said it “will take all necessary action to encourage dialogue,” but argued that “the only possible path remains an agreement to establish that Iran is once again fulfilling its obligations. It is therefore essential that negotiations resume very quickly.”

As the UN Security Council Facilitator for Resolution 2231 on the Iran nuclear deal, Ireland said it has “engaged extensively to encourage a return to compliance by all parties.” Ireland welcomed the commitment of the US administration to return to the agreement and urged Iran “to seize this opportunity, to return swiftly to talks in Vienna, and to come back into full compliance with the agreement, including by cooperating fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency.” Oman also expressed hope “that the Vienna talks on the Iranian nuclear program will lead to the desired consensus among all parties, because we firmly believe that this will be in the interest of the Region and the world.”

A few countries expressed concern with the JCPOA, with the United Arab Emirates arguing that “any future agreement with Iran must address the shortcomings of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and must involve the countries of the region,” and Israel asserting that Iran is continuing to develop its nuclear weapon programme. Israel proclaimed, “We will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.”

Biological and chemical weapons

The other weapons of mass destruction did not receive much attention at the general debate. Iraq noted it has suffered the use of chemical weapons, and Norway said, “The increased threat from chemical weapons must be countered.” Syria reiterated its claim that it has fulfilled its Chemical Weapons Convention obligations and has cooperated with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and accused others of politicising the issue.

Russia said it is “awaiting the response to the Russian initiative to elaborate a convention on the

suppression of acts of chemical and biological terrorism,” while Kazakhstan highlighted its proposal last year for an “International Agency for Biological Safety.”

Armed drones

A few states raised issues related to drones. Pakistan highlighted that the United States has conducted 480 drone attacks in Pakistan. “And we all know that the drone attacks are not that precise. They cause more collateral damage than the militants they are targeting.”

Israel accused Iran of making operational a “new deadly terror unit—swarms of killer UAVs [uncrewed aerial vehicles] armed with lethal weapons that can attack any place any time.” Israel said Iran plans “to blanket the skies of the Middle East with this lethal force.” Saudi Arabia said it will defend itself against drone attacks, among other things.

Autonomous weapons

Only two speakers addressed the issue of autonomous weapon systems (AWS), but they did so strongly. The UN Secretary-General called for a ban on autonomous weapons, which “choose targets and kill people without human interference.” Austria similarly called for “clear red lines that we as humankind are not willing to cross,” which “includes stepping back from creating killing machines—lethal autonomous weapons systems—systems where an algorithm decides in a split second who lives and who dies.” Austria highlighted that the previous week it organised a conference to ensure meaningful human control over weapons. “Together with partner countries and civil society, we hope to establish a process leading to a ban of killer robots.”

Cyber peace and security

An increasing number of delegations raised concerns about cyber-related issues, including Belarus, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Japan, Kyrgyzstan,

Latvia, Malta, Mauritius, Micronesia, Monaco, Niger, Romania, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, San Marino, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, Switzerland, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, United States, and Zimbabwe. Many highlighted cyber-attacks and the deliberate spreading of misinformation online as key concerns; others noted the impact of growing digital divides on global equality.

The UN Secretary-General noted that “restoring trust and inspiring hope means bridging the digital divide.” He pointed out that half of humanity has no access to the internet and highlighted his Roadmap for Digital Co-operation, which seeks to get everyone online by 2030. However, he also noted that there are dangers associated with the use and abuse of data online:

A vast library of information is being assembled about each of us. Yet we don't even have the keys to that library. We don't know how this information has been collected, by whom or for what purposes. But we do know our data is being used commercially—to boost corporate profits. Our behavior patterns are being commodified and sold like futures contracts. Our data is also being used to influence our perceptions and opinions. Governments and others can exploit it to control or manipulate people's behaviour, violating human rights of individuals or groups, and undermining democracy. This is not science fiction. This is today's reality. And it requires a serious discussion.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines similarly noted that “the behemoths in global communications,” which are “enveloped in mega profits and profiteering,” also “own and control the various internet platforms, with little or no public regulation, and have ignored or abandoned any real sense of responsibility for the anti-vax misinformation and disinformation which occupy cyberspace. As a consequence, real people die in their multitudes across the world. Surely, this irresponsibility must stop!” Barbados likewise raised concerns about “fake news,” arguing that states have “come together with alacrity to defend the right of states to tax across the digital space but we are not prepared to come together quickly to defend the right of our citizens not to be duped by fake news in

that same space.” Qatar also highlighted misuse of cyberspace as a concern, such as “breaching private domains of individuals and international piracy.” It reiterated the call for the UN to unify efforts “to prevent the misuse of the scientific progress in cybersecurity and regularize these vital aspects according to the rules of international law.”

Some delegations highlighted their efforts on securing cyberspace. France said it is working within Europe to adopt legislation on digital markets and encouraged others to do the same in order to “establish a new digital public order in the wake of the Paris Call and the Christchurch Call to Action, which, since 2019, has enabled us to take decisive action to remove terrorist content from the Internet.” Japan said it is working with the UN and regionally for “a free, fair, and secure cyber-space.”

More broadly, a number of delegates spoke about the efforts to address the militarisation of cyberspace, including cyberattacks and cyberwar. The UN Secretary-General noted that there is a lack of legal framework to address this, while Latvia noted that security threats in cyberspace are increasing and called for the development of new legal principles to “avoid risks and damage to human rights and freedoms.” Austria said, “We have to make sure that our human centric approach applies online as well as offline. New technologies are no new frontier where human rights do not exist!”

To this end, work is underway at the UN on these issues. Switzerland noted that “the virtual world is not a lawless zone” and said it is working in the UN “to promote responsible state behaviour and the application of international law in cyberspace. It also participates in efforts to combat cybercrime.” Estonia also highlighted its long-standing involvement in developing a “normative framework for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace,” noting that at the heart of this work is international law, including the UN Charter, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law. “Discussions on cybersecurity and cybercrime must ensure that we make a concentrated effort to implement the rules of the road we already have,” said Estonia, calling on

states to implement existing legal frameworks and urging the inclusion of companies and civil society in discussions.

Russia warned about states’ intention “to militarise the internet and unleash a cyber arms race.” It highlighted ongoing work at the UN to agree upon ways to ensure cyber security, emphasising that the process “should not be based on someone’s special rules, but rather on universal agreements allowing to examine any concerns in a transparent manner, relying on facts. This is the aim of our initiative to elaborate standard norms for states’ responsible behaviour in the use of ICTs and are preparing a universal convention on combating cybercrime.” The United States said it is working to protect its “critical infrastructure against cyberattacks, disrupting ransomware networks, and working to establish clear rules of the road for all nations as it relates to cyberspace.”

Armed conflict and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas

While efforts are underway to prevent future weapons and wars, many governments also raised concerns with ongoing armed conflicts. Most delegations addressing the General Assembly called for a peaceful resolution to specific armed conflicts around the world. Some highlighted the destruction caused by warfighting in populated areas, and the impacts of conflict on civilians. Bahrain, for example, noted that armed conflicts “have resulted in the loss of lives, the displacement of millions of refugees and displaced persons, and the destruction of cities, villages, and infrastructure, turning the lives of these people into a painful tragedy of daily suffering, driving away opportunities for peace, security, and stability.” Similarly, Dominica highlighted that the “destruction brought about by wars within and between countries continues to displace millions of people from their homes creating unprecedented refugee crises.”

Delegates did not often address the use of specific weapons in armed conflict, though Azerbaijan highlighted the challenge posed by “the vast

presence of landmines planted by Armenia,” and urged the international community to “force” Armenia to provide it with accurate mine maps. Georgia, meanwhile, said that Armenia provided these maps.

Several delegations condemned violations of international humanitarian law more broadly, including the deliberate targeting of civilians or aid workers. In relation to the conflict in Syria, Malta said the “attacks on children, hospitals, schools, and other vital civilian infrastructure including potable water production plants is of grave concern.” Niger critiqued the deliberate targeting of “civilian populations and schools, as is the case in the Central Sahel region, where villages are frequently attacked and thousands of children are deprived of education as a result of these attacks.” Malta also addressed the impact of conflict on children, noting that every year, the international community fails to protect children “from violence, from cruelty, from harm, and from realising their full potential.” It condemned the recruitment and abduction of children into armed conflict and called on all states to “support the full implementation of strong child protection mandates, including through the speedy deployment of senior child protection advisors and teams, and by prioritising the protection of children in peacekeeping transitions.”

Ukraine condemned bombings in Afghanistan, while Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen condemned the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, including with ballistic missiles and armed drones. Yemen also critiqued the use by militias of “ballistic missiles, drones, and heavy weaponry” in Yemen, “with total indifference to the lives of civilians and the displaced persons that escaped their areas of control that are estimated by more than two million people.” France heightened the targeting of humanitarian and medical personnel, even as they are providing emergency relief to populations. It called for better prevention and accountability.

A few countries highlighted the importance of stopping such violations of international

humanitarian law. New Zealand called on all states to “strengthen and improve respect for the laws of armed conflict, and to enhance the protection of civilians.” It argued, “Preventing both the use of illegal weapons, and the illegal use of legal weapons, is essential, as is ensuring there is no impunity for any such use.” Switzerland said it is “working hard to promote international law, including humanitarian law, in order to avoid conflicts or reduce their effects.” It highlighted that it has prepared a report on the implementation of international humanitarian law and called on UN member states to do the same.

While many delegations highlighted the importance of ceasefires in specific contexts, few delegations addressed last year’s call by the UN Secretary-General for a global ceasefire and cessation of all armed conflict during the pandemic. Even as many states recognised the conflagration of conflict and COVID-19, it seems the appeal for peace is no longer foremost on the agenda. One exception was Malaysia, which highlighted its efforts earlier this year to lead on the issuance of a joint communiqué on a global ceasefire. “We strongly believe that the UN membership must speak with one voice on the need for an immediate cessation of hostilities in all corners of the world,” said Malaysia’s Prime Minister, but “it is unfortunate that we are far from realizing this global ceasefire.”

Small arms and light weapons and the international arms trade

While a global ceasefire remains elusive, so too does control of the flow of weapons. Many delegations, including Croatia, Gabon, The Gambia, Jamaica, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia, and Zimbabwe pointed to the illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons (SALW) as a key concern for international peace and security, as well as a contributing factor to global inequalities and violence.

Jamaica noted, “The widespread availability of these arms and their ammunition is a key enabler of conflict and endemic crime, and represents a

significant danger to our internal security, fostering criminal activities which destabilize the social order.” It pledged to work with its partners “to enhance the capacity of member states to address issues related to arms control and disarmament, by preventing the diversion of conventional arms to the illicit market.” Trinidad and Tobago likewise recognised that the “increasing incidence of violent crime domestically, bedevils our efforts toward achieving sustainable development and the maintenance of the rule of law,” arguing that the illicit trafficking of small arms and increasingly sophisticated weaponry facilitates these activities.

Mexico highlighted the links between “the irresponsible arms trade and trafficking” and “the increase in violence, homicides and the commission of high-impact crimes that affect the security of citizens, limit their possibilities for development and undermine the social fabric.” It urged the UN Security Council to “take measures to ensure stricter control of small arms and light weapons, as these are the fuel that fuels the world’s conflicts.” Saint Kitts and Nevis explained that “the uncontrolled proliferation of the illicit trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons has significant impacts on the health and well-being, socio-economic development, human rights and human development of every citizen in the world.” It urged that “new challenges faced as a result of technological developments” be taken into consideration and confronted.

Several delegations highlighted actions against the illicit trade in SALW. Croatia said it “will continue advocating for effective multilateral action on tackling illegal arms transfers and build-ups.” Zambia said it “remains committed to the call of the Lusaka Roadmap to silence guns in Africa and the initiative being implemented by all African Union (AU) member states to promote peace and security, which has since been endorsed for extension for a further ten-year period from 2021 to 2030.” It called for further support from the UN on this initiative. The Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Zimbabwe also highlighted the importance of the Silencing the Guns initiative. The Gambia said there is “undisputed recognition of strong interlinkages between

peace and development, with studies confirming that armed conflicts remain a major obstacle to development in the continent.” In this context, it called on the international community to “act coherently to address the root causes of conflicts and recovery in Africa by adopting new approaches and narratives that suit the demands of our time.”

Nigeria agreed the excessive accumulation and uncontrolled spread of SALW “in many regions of the world are having devastating humanitarian and socio-economic consequences, especially on the continent of Africa.” Due to this reality, it called for the “world-wide application of the Arms Trade Treaty [ATT] to codify accountability in conventional arms trade, which is critical to the security of nations.” Mozambique and Trinidad and Tobago also highlighted the importance of the ATT in this regard. Some countries mentioned the challenges of weapons proliferation in zones of conflict, including Burundi, while a few raised the importance of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes in post-conflict situations, including Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Malta, and Mozambique.



Image: Dimity Hawkins

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Contributors to this edition:

International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom



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www.reachingcriticalwill.org



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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.

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Editors: Ray Acheson and
Allison Pytlak
disarm@wilpf.org

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