

IV. The UN Secretary-General's launch of a new disarmament agenda

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In May 2018, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, launched *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament* in a speech at the University of Geneva in Switzerland.¹ The agenda sets three priorities: (a) disarmament to save humanity, through the reduction and elimination of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons; (b) disarmament that saves lives, by diminishing the impact of conventional weapons; and (c) disarmament for future generations, by addressing new military technologies.² While previous Secretaries-General have emphasized disarmament, the emphasis on the humanitarian perspective, the comprehensive approach and the linkage to new technologies are new.

The new agenda is motivated by the Secretary-General's concern over the lack of progress on global disarmament as well as increases in military spending and global arms competition, while at the same time geopolitical tensions are increasing and dialogue mechanisms are being eroded. Guterres' foreword begins: 'We are living in dangerous times'.³

Conventional weapons are the focus of roughly one-third of the 80-page document. These comprise major conventional weapons, small arms and light weapons, and landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions have been banned, and conventional arms have been made the subject of regulation through the Arms Trade Treaty. Nonetheless, conventional weapons continue to become ever more sophisticated and deadly.

The agenda discusses an existential need for humanity to make progress on disarmament and highlights a direct linkage with attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—not least because the SDGs explicitly set a goal of reducing illicit arms flows.⁴ The disarmament agenda also makes the displacement argument that excessive spending on weapons drains resources for sustainable development, and appeals to governments to reduce spending on

¹ Guterres, A., Remarks at the University of Geneva on the launch of the Disarmament Agenda, United Nations, Geneva, 24 May 2018.

² United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs, *Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament* (United Nations: New York, 2018). For a discussion on the biological and chemical weapons issues, see chapter 8, section III, in this volume; for a discussion on nuclear issues, see chapter 7, section V, in this volume.

³ United Nations (note 2).

⁴ See also Bromley, M. and Caparini, M., 'SDG 16.4 and the collection of data on illicit arms flows: Progress made but challenges ahead', SIPRI Backgrounder, 15 June 2018.

armaments and instead invest in achieving the SDGs.⁵ In relation to SDG Target 5.2, eliminating all forms of violence against all women and girls, the agenda raises the importance of addressing the gendered impact of arms. It urges states not to transfer arms or ammunition where there is a risk of gender-based violence, which is consistent with the provisions of the Arms Trade Treaty; to incorporate gender perspectives into the development of disarmament and arms control policies; and to consider how gender roles can shape arms control and disarmament policies and practices.⁶

The document further highlights the disproportionate effect on civilians of the use of explosive weapons in urban warfare. Civilians constitute an estimated 90 per cent of the casualties in such circumstances. In response to this challenge, UN member states are currently discussing the development of limitations and operational policies on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA) (see section I). During the UN General Assembly's 2018 meeting of the First Committee, 50 states made a joint statement to express their concern over the humanitarian harm caused by EWIPA.⁷

On 'disarmament to save future generations', the disarmament agenda stresses that new technologies, if used maliciously, could provoke a new arms race and endanger future generations. It argues that 'the combined risks of new weapon technologies could have a game-changing impact on our future security'.⁸ While the theme is cross-cutting, it is closely connected to conventional arms since their functionality and lethality could be adjusted using new or emerging technologies, as is evident from the discussion on the degree of autonomy in weapons systems under the Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Convention (see section I). The Secretary-General offers to support states with elaborating new measures such as 'legally binding arrangements' to ensure that 'humans remain at all times in control over the use of force'.⁹

The disarmament agenda endorses the traditional disarmament instruments of elimination and destruction, prohibition and restriction, non-proliferation, regulation, reduction and limitation, transparency and confidence-building, and remediation such as demining. On conventional arms, it specifically highlights the importance of stockpile management. The agenda also encourages new initiatives, and in particular highlights the need to reinvigorate existing disarmament institutions, inter alia, through

⁵ UN News, 'UN chief launches new disarmament agenda "to secure our world and our future"', 28 May 2018.

⁶ United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), p. 39. On the Arms Trade Treaty, see chapter 10, section I, in this volume.

⁷ Joint statement on Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas, delivered by Ireland, United Nations General Assembly, 25 Oct. 2018.

⁸ United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), section 3.

⁹ United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), p. 55.

enhanced coordination, better use of expertise, a stronger role for women, more involvement of young people, and education and training.¹⁰

The implementation plan for the disarmament agenda foresees actions in two areas with regard to conventional arms: mitigating their humanitarian impact, and addressing their excessive accumulation and illicit trade.¹¹ On the humanitarian dimension, the document supports and encourages member state initiatives on avoiding the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and common standards for the transfer, holding and use of unmanned aerial vehicles. The Secretary-General explicitly supports a political declaration on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Other actions are primarily directed at UN institutions: (a) sharing policy and practice on protecting civilians; (b) introducing casualty recording in UN operations; (c) establishing civilian harm mitigation cells within military structures to 'track, investigate and take appropriate measures to address, mitigate and remedy harm to civilians'; and (d) strengthening inter-agency coordination on IEDs.¹² To address excessive accumulations and illicit arms transfers, states and other relevant actors are encouraged to take action to improve their stockpile management. The importance of regional confidence-building dialogue is highlighted, which would, among other things, encourage mutual restraint on military expenditure and arms acquisitions, as well as holdings and transfers.

Although directed at various UN entities, most of the actions would need to involve states in order to be effective, most notably: (a) establishing a small arms trust fund within the UN Peacebuilding Fund; (b) 'building understanding of the impact of arms on conflict management'; and (c) facilitating dialogue to build confidence, with the ultimate goal of reducing military spending as well as arms acquisitions, holdings and transfers. The status of each action with regard to implementation is indicated, which provides an instrument for monitoring progress. In January 2019, status ranged from 'action not available yet' to implementation in development or in progress.

While otherwise highly comprehensive, an obvious omission from the disarmament agenda is the lack of any reference to the Arms Trade Treaty. The responses of UN member states to the agenda have been largely positive, as reflected in numerous statements in the First Committee. Of the P5, however, only China mentioned—and welcomed—the agenda in its statement in the First Committee general debate. Implementation of the agenda is therefore likely to face a number of obstacles in addition to the obvious challenge of mobilizing the financial resources required to support the proposed actions.

¹⁰ United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs (note 2), 'Executive summary', p. xi.

¹¹ United Nations, Securing Our Common Future: An Agenda for Disarmament, Implementation plan, Updated 8 Mar. 2019.

¹² United Nations (note 2), p. 36.