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## A Critical, Complex Relationship

Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala's recent article ("Advanced Conventional Weapons and Nuclear Disarmament: Why the Obama Plan Won't Work," 20.1, March 2013, pp. 107-22) raises some important questions about the relationship between nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control. Its historical and global contexts, however, require some elaboration, as this is neither a new issue nor limited to one country.

The relationship dates back to the United Nations (UN) Charter. While the pre-atomic Charter distinguished between "disarmament" and the "regulation of armaments," the UN had, by 1946, clarified that these goals encompassed the elimination of nuclear weapons and other "weapons adaptable to mass destruction," as well as the limitation and reduction of conventional arms.

In 1952, the UN Disarmament Commission, then under the Security Council, was mandated to negotiate a comprehensive global treaty addressing both objectives. The General Assembly first put the item "general and complete disarmament under effective international control" (GCD)—which integrates these goals—on its agenda in 1959, where it has been ever since.

President John F. Kennedy offered his own GCD proposal in the UN General Assembly in a speech on September 25, 1961, which clearly recognized the need for both nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control, as did a contemporaneous Soviet proposal.

In 1978, the first Special Session of the General Assembly on disarmament termed GCD the "ultimate objective" of the international community.

There are GCD references in twelve multilateral treaties, including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

and each of the treaties establishing nuclear weapon-free zones. There was no conditionality or sequencing of these goals, which were clearly intended to be pursued simultaneously. Yet today, few remember the term GCD or recall what it means.

The complex relationship between nuclear weapon proliferation and conventional arms capabilities has also been recognized repeatedly by US government and military officials in several administrations, though, as the authors rightfully note, not in a disarmament context. For example:

- "Because of our conventional military dominance, adversaries are likely to use asymmetric means, such as WMD [weapons of mass destruction], information operations or terrorism."<sup>1</sup>
- "... [O]ur American military superiority presents... a paradox. We have a superpower paradox; because our potential adversaries know they can't win in a conventional challenge to the United States forces. So they are more likely to try unconventional or asymmetrical methods, such as biological or chemical weapons."<sup>2</sup>
- "US conventional military dominance encourages future adversaries and competitors... to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States. Instead, they will use asymmetric means such as WMD, information warfare, terrorism, taking the fight to

<sup>1</sup> White House, "A National Security Strategy for a New Century," December 1999, <<http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2000.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> William Cohen, speech at the National Press Club, "Forming Bonds of Diplomacy to Avoid War: As Delivered by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen and Gen. Henry H. Shelton, USA chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," Washington, DC, March 17, 1998, <[www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=675](http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=675)>.

urban areas, or the application of technological surprise to offset our conventional advantages and achieve their goals—even posing a direct threat to the US homeland...The asymmetric challenge with the gravest potential facing the US today is the threat posed by the global proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery."<sup>3</sup>

In their statements at the United Nations in recent years, the nuclear weapon states have emphasized various preconditions that must be satisfied before nuclear disarmament will be possible. These have typically included such goals as resolving regional disputes, eliminating risks of WMD terrorism and proliferation, improving the security of nuclear materials, concluding a fissile material treaty, and other such "steps." While such statements rarely address limits on conventional arms, the Russian Federation has been stressing this issue in recent years.

On April 1, 2013, for example, Russian Federation Ambassador Vitaly Churkin declared at the UN Disarmament Commission that, under present conditions, "further reduction of nuclear weapons is impossible without proper consideration of all the factors of international security that could have a negative impact on strategic stability. Such factors... include the unilateral and unlimited build-up of the global anti-missile defense system, lack of any substantial progress in the ratification of the CTBT [Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty], unwillingness to renounce the possibility of placement of weapons in outer space, quantitative and qualitative imbalances in the field of conventional arms, etc."<sup>4</sup>

For his part, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has often addressed the

need for progress in both nuclear disarmament and conventional arms control, underscoring their role in strengthening international peace and security. As the second point of his five point nuclear disarmament proposal of October 24, 2008, he called upon the Security Council to commence discussions on "security issues in the nuclear disarmament process." His fifth point concerned "complementary measures" including "the elimination of other types of WMD; new efforts against WMD terrorism; limits on the production and trade in conventional arms; and new weapons bans, including of missiles and space weapons."

Critics of nuclear disarmament frequently castigate the UN and its supporters for naively believing that the elimination of nuclear weapons would alone inaugurate an era of peace. Such critics have never understood that the world community agreed long ago that nuclear disarmament must be accompanied both by reliable guarantees (verification, transparency, irreversibility, universality, and binding commitments) and new limitations and reductions of conventional arms. The benefits of this integrated approach for security are clear, and Futter and Zala deserve credit for raising this issue, which will only grow in importance—both nationally and globally—as the numbers of nuclear weapons continue to fall.

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This letter represents the views of the author and not necessarily those of the United Nations.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. Peter J. Schoomaker, prepared statement for the Senate Committee on Armed Services, "21st Century Security Threats: Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services," 105th Cong., 2nd sess., March 5, 1998

<sup>4</sup> H.E. Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, prepared statement for the 2013 Substantive Session of the Disarmament Commission, April 1, 2013, <[www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/dc/2013/statements/1April\\_Russia.pdf](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/dc/2013/statements/1April_Russia.pdf)>.