Possible measures and processes for making progress on nuclear disarmament have been receiving increasing attention in multilateral diplomacy since the end of the last NPT Review cycle. Irrespective of how nuclear disarmament progress is made—and there are many views about that—one thing is clear. It is that along the path to eliminating nuclear weapons, possessors and non-possessors of those armaments will have to develop and agree on various means of verifying the destruction of nuclear armaments and prohibiting future existence of them and the fissile material that they contain.

This need is widely appreciated. It is also broadly understood that negotiating those mechanisms is likely to be complex and militarily and politically sensitive. The problems surrounding the launch of negotiations just to ban fissile material production bears witness to that. The unsettled international security environment and the absence of any consensus on making the next moves towards nuclear disarmament are troubling. Fostering progress in these circumstances will itself present certain challenges. The question, however, is whether those circumstances should be regarded as a hindrance rather than an incentive for fostering progress. Complex agreements have in the past been reached in unpropitious circumstances (e.g., START 1, and the CFE Treaty).

That is why there are a number of initiatives afoot to prepare the ground for dealing with these complexities and sensitivities. UNIDIR believed that in those circumstances there was scope to carry out a survey of verification experience, precedents and tools on which the international community would be able to draw for taking that particular element of nuclear disarmament forward. (As noted by the chair, the government of New Zealand funded that survey.)

Survey of Current initiatives

As this event is taking place in the margins of the NPT Preparatory Committee meeting, I should make one more general point. An abiding criticism of the NPT is that its membership distinguishes between the five nuclear-weapon states recognized by the treaty and non-nuclear-weapon states, imparting a perception of discrimination. Personally, I think that this perception is misplaced: non-nuclear-weapon states signed up to the treaty with their eyes open. The criticism of discrimination arises only because expectations among those states about the pace of disarmament by the nuclear-weapon states have not yet been met.

In any event, this perception of discrimination will have to be set aside because, in reality, differences in the manner in which verification mechanisms are applied between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states are inevitable. While all states are sensitive to a greater or lesser degree to intrusiveness in relation
to their military complexes, those sensitivities will be especially acute among nuclear-weapon states. This issue may be able to be resolved by the way in which access is managed (e.g., through challenge inspections), but balancing efficient verifiability, non-discrimination and intrusiveness among states will be difficult.

But this is where the initiatives to which I have just alluded come into the picture. UNIDIR’s overview identifies a range of initiatives by states, civil society, and academic and other specialist institutions that can be seen as preparing the ground for future negotiations on verification mechanisms for nuclear disarmament. For instance, we have drawn attention to the United Kingdom-Norway Initiative on dismantlement verification that began in 2007—the pioneering project that brought together a nuclear-weapon state and a non-nuclear-weapon state to collaborate on verification issues. It is significant that Norway and the UK believe that there are no a priori legal barriers, such as NPT obligations, to collaboration between nuclear-weapon states and non-nuclear-weapon states.

We have also seen steady growth in the activities, and to an extent, in the membership of the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV) launched by the United States in December 2014 with the objective of working with nuclear weapon states and non-nuclear weapons states to ‘better understand the technical problems of verifying nuclear disarmament, and to develop solutions’. Placing the work of the IPNDV in the current context United States Ambassador Robert Wood observed that by focusing on the technical challenges, important progress could be made toward shared disarmament goals, independent of the ebbs and flows of the political environment, and open new lanes of multilateral cooperation to achieve those goals. The partnership aims to build on lessons learned from the United Kingdom–Norway Initiative and the United States–United Kingdom Technical Cooperation Programme.

Verification activities related to the production of fissile material are also a focus of the Canadian-led UN High-level FMCT expert preparatory group. The survey provides more details and comment on these and other initiatives.

**Way forward**

UNIDIR’s survey also explains what is meant by ‘verification’ and outlines the role that verification mechanisms are intended to play in ensuring that international obligations are fulfilled. By way of possible analogy with verifying the destruction of nuclear weapons, we summarize existing verification commitments of relevance including those contained in treaties covering the two other categories of weapons of mass destruction (biological and chemical weapons). The part played by international organisations in promoting states’ adherence to these obligations, and in trying to hold them to account if they fail to do so, is also covered.

More broadly, we have looked beyond the current debate on nuclear disarmament towards the development of the mechanisms required to provide assurances that a nuclear-weapon-free world could be achieved and maintained. Reaching these
objectives will be challenging, but, as our paper shows, feasible. I refer to chapter 4
of the survey in this regard where 18 key practical verification challenges are listed
ranging from costs, to the availability of technical expertise, to baseline declarations,
to transparency, intrusiveness and institutional questions. The paper also mentions
confidence-building such as the 20-year long pre-negotiation efforts of the Group of
Scientific Experts that laid the groundwork for the CTBT.

While the paper surveys the verification landscape as a kind of stocktake it does not,
however, delve into technical aspects of verification or what the Stockholm
International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has characterised as ‘nuclear forensic
analysis’. But it does draw on such initiatives, analogies and precedents to highlight
key political and legal challenges to be overcome by the international community in
order to provide assurance that obligations to remove nuclear weapons from
military arsenals can be verified in practice.

The paper was published just before Norway tabled a resolution on verification in
First Committee, and I would like to commend Norway also for that initiative. That
resolution [A/RES/71/67] resulted, as we know, in the setting up by the UN General
Assembly of a group of government experts which will meet in 2018 and 2019 with
the task of considering the role of verification in advancing nuclear disarmament. In
the meantime, the UN Secretary-General has been asked to seek the views of
Member States on the development and strengthening of practical and effective
verification measures and on their importance in achieving and maintaining a world
without nuclear weapons. UNIDIR’s hope is that our survey will prove a useful
resource to states as they prepare to submit their views to the Secretary-General.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the complexity and nature of political and military sensitivities
surrounding nuclear disarmament verification should not be under-estimated.
Nevertheless, as surveyed in UNIDIR’s paper, serious efforts are already being made
to understand, address and overcome those sensitivities at a practical level. The
experience of existing verification organisations will also be a valuable source. From
a United Nations perspective, the elimination of nuclear weapons is a common ideal
of the international community. Nuclear warfare has the potential to have existential
consequences: all nations therefore have a stake in achieving a nuclear-weapon-free
world. Certainly, to be effective, legally binding agreements verifying the elimination
of this remaining class of weapon of mass destruction will require universal
participation.
The survey can be found on UNIDIR’s website www.unidir.org.

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