



Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Arms Race: The World at Crossroads

The Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) organised a panel discussion on “Nuclear Disarmament or Nuclear Arms Race: The World at Crossroads” during the Geneva Peace Week.

It was opened by Aidan Liddle, Permanent Representative for the United Kingdom to the Conference on Disarmament, who highlighted the advances since the end of the Cold War including the reducing of the total number of warheads from around 70,000 in the mid-1980s to around 15,000. The NPT had been a huge success, in providing a framework for disarmament as well as in preventing further proliferation and promoting the peaceful uses of nuclear technology in a safe and secure way.

Marc Finaud from the GCSP and Peter Herby, expert in humanitarian disarmament, insisted that Nuclear Weapon States’ proclaimed doctrine of nuclear deterrence and strategic stability, along with undermined and stalled multilateral frameworks and agreements, have moved us into an arms race era. Indeed, Susanne Hammer, disarmament expert at the Permanent Mission of Austria to United Nations, agreed, adding that the “Doom’s day Clock” is dangerously stuck at 2 minutes before midnight.

Despite the stark opening accounts, it seemed important to also highlight the long overdue shift in focus from seeing nuclear weapons as a security tool to focussing equally on the catastrophic implications of nuclear weapon use for people, societies, the environment, global food production and indeed for the survival of humanity. This was a driving force behind the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), according to Peter. Marc agreed that if certain weapons cannot be used in compliance with international humanitarian law, because of their indiscriminate effects, those weapons have to be eliminated. Furthermore, the TPNW, adopted in 2017, and the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 won by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) for it, has brought the nuclear debate back into the public spheres and inspired youth, grassroots movements and parliamentary action.

Susanne provided a conciliatory suggestion, noting that work needed to be done on both nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation – as two sides of the same coin. Aidan stressed the need to work hard within the existing NPT framework; the recent UN Secretary General’s Disarmament Agenda showed that there were no new ideas out there on nuclear disarmament, and the TPNW’s attempt to short-cut the process would not eliminate a single weapon.

Looking at the way ahead, all agreed that there was no substitute for patience and hard work. While diverging on the next steps needed and recognising that paths towards a world without nuclear weapons may differ, the need for cooperative and trusted ways forward was voiced by all panellists.

The 2020 NPT Review Conference was acknowledged as a critical milestone to work together towards, but care should be taken in seeing it as the golden chalice – a mistake repeated all too often in the past.

Peter closed in reminding us all that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought”.

--

QUNO Geneva through its Peace and Disarmament Programme continues to explore how mutual trust and cooperative dialogue can uphold the multilateral system to address nuclear disarmament. Alongside this work, the Programme is building bridging initiatives between human rights, disarmament and private sectors in order to better leverage opportunities in respective areas of work towards the common aim of a more peaceful world.