

## Report from the UN Disarmament Commission

by Dorrie Weiss

[Back to Previous Page](#)

The UN Disarmament Commission is open to all UN member states to examine a few issues in depth in sessions spanning three years. The 2003 session, which met from March 31 to April 17, addressed two items: "ways and means to achieve nuclear disarmament" and "practical confidence-building measures in the field of conventional arms."

Taking place against the background of the Iraq war, a conflict that most UN member states see as a violation of international law, comments on the war and on the Middle East came into the debate making nuclear disarmament issues ominously relevant.

Global military expenditures are rising, and will probably exceed \$1 trillion this year according to Jayantha Dhanapala, the retiring Undersecretary General for Disarmament Affairs. He noted that the difficulty of achieving nuclear disarmament is symbolized by the fact that the issue has been on the UN agenda for 57 years.

At the same time, there still are tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, the DPRK has announced its withdrawal from the NPT, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty has not been ratified by 13 of the 44 states with nuclear capacities that must ratify for it to come into force. Also, the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva has been unable to agree on a substantive agenda.

The current US administration has abandoned the longstanding US commitment to deterrence and has opted for a doctrine of preemption, in its oxymoronic preventive war policy. It has also abandoned the no-first-use policy and the pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. Worldwide, new arsenals are being equipped with hybrid weapons that blur the distinction between conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction. Weapons are shattering the integrity of outer space, and a treaty to prevent this was proposed in the debate.

Delegations also pointed to some bright spots in the course of the UNDC debate. A coalition of countries from the former Soviet Union, plus China, have founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to address a broad range of mutual interests. Cuba has acceded to the NPT and to the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which delineates a nuclear-weapon-free zone in Latin America and the Caribbean. Strengthening existing nuclear-weapon-free zones and creating new ones was supported widely, specifically for Central Asia and for the Middle East.

Ideas proposed to move forward included a treaty banning fissile material, and a register to monitor fissile stocks. Many delegates stated that the total elimination of nuclear weapons was the goal, that elimination had to be irreversible and verifiable. There was not much point, they noted, in separating delivery systems from payloads if they could be quickly reassembled.

The Holy See, advocating multilateralism, said the force of law should be honored before the law of force. Belarus urged giving legally binding guarantees to non-nuclear weapon states against the threat or use of nuclear weapons, while both Mongolia and Syria noted that conventional arms were being developed with great destructive power and should be added to the seven categories of weapons in the Arms Register. The Russian Federation advocated drafting a global convention to combat nuclear terrorism, and the representative from the Ukraine noted that strategic stability must include economic, social, humanitarian and environmental factors.

The right to possess weapons for self-defense is consistent with disarmament that reduces threats and builds confidence. But most important is to eliminate the root causes of distrust and address issues of cooperative

security.

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[Back to top](#)

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