

OPINION

A Realistic View of Global Weapons Norms

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UNITED NATIONS -- Many global norms govern the production or use of weapons. Some seek to eliminate certain weapons outright (such as weapons of mass destruction) while others have a more regulatory focus (as in the case of conventional arms). Despite widespread support for such norms, self-described "realists" view them as idealistic. They believe that raw power is the only thing that really matters in world affairs. They survey the landscape of world history and see nothing but a graveyard of abandoned or violated norms. Hence their motto: "might makes right."

To the realist, norms represent the cobwebs -- not the steel girders -- of the architecture of international security. Realists, of course, wear many clothes. Some view global weapons regimes as discriminatory contrivances founded on power politics, an argument occasionally made by states to rationalize their non-membership, while others have sought to exploit membership as a cynical means to acquire resources needed for hidden weapons programmes.

Yet if history teaches that global norms were either worthless or predatory, why did the architects of the post-war world choose among their top priorities the creation of a United Nations to advance global norms covering virtually every aspect of human relations? If the sheer force of arms were the ultimate arbiter of world affairs, why bother with a UN, and similarly, what is the point of negotiating treaties of arms control and disarmament?

The answer of course is that rational leaders and their fellow citizens understood the collective benefits from cooperating to pursue common interests. The negotiation of numerous arms control and disarmament treaties over the last half-century was a joint undertaking, not the result of the strong dictating to the weak. Such treaties arose out of enlightened self-interest. They also arose because of the nightmare of a world left only with the norm of self-help.

The post-war period thus left a rich legacy that included not just the UN, but also a skein of multilateral treaties that established a framework for security on a planetary scale. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) established a global taboo not just on the proliferation, but also the production -- indeed the very possession -- of such weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is also far more than merely a "non-proliferation" treaty, for it commits its five nuclear-weapon states to global nuclear disarmament.

Also, hundreds of millions of people now live in regions that have banned even the stationing of nuclear weapons -- this was the result of treaties creating nuclear-weapon-free zones in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific, while five states in Central Asia are actively

seeking to establish a similar zone, the first entirely north of the Equator. Other treaties have banned the placement of nuclear weapons on the seabed or in Antarctica, as well as the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in outer space.

Most remarkable of all is the overwhelming pattern of compliance with these treaties: while rare deviations do indeed pose grave threats to international peace and security, they nonetheless must not mask the undeniable reality of day-to-day compliance by the overwhelming majority. These norms persist because countries view them as legitimate, both in terms of their goals and the way they were created. When properly tuned, the UN's disarmament machinery can serve as a veritable production line for multilateral norms and the collective means to implement them.

The process encompasses non-binding resolutions of the First Committee of the General Assembly, focused deliberations in the UN Disarmament Commission, and the negotiation of new treaties in the Conference on Disarmament. Though enforcement depends largely on actions by states and -- in the case of threats to international peace and security -- decisions made by the UN Security Council, compliance is also promoted by accountability procedures embedded in the multilateral treaties. This delicate machinery, however, requires constant maintenance. It can rust through disuse or political stalemates -- a problem that the Conference on

Disarmament has faced in recent years. Its usefulness is constantly challenged by champions of other production lines, in particular by those who would enter into treaty commitments and cheat on them, those who continue to argue that security is merely a function of armaments, those who believe that weapons of mass destruction "in the right hands" are not a problem, those who have unlimited faith in defences against such weapons, and those who seek peace through military dominance or the old "balance of power" -- updated to accommodate the deadliest weapons imaginable. Proponents of disarmament therefore cannot take their issue for granted. They must educate the public about the benefits of maintaining global disarmament norms and the costs of destroying them.

They must work to promote universal membership in the key treaties -- especially the NPT, CWC, and BWC -- while improving their accountability, transparency, and compliance. They must develop new global norms, including in such areas as preventing an arms race in outer space, eliminating delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction, and responding to threats from revolutionary new weapons systems not covered by other treaties.

They must also work to increase funding for multilateral disarmament activities, which pales relative to global military spending -- now rapidly approaching \$1 trillion a year, even a fraction of which would have enormously more productive uses in development. Realistically speaking, what is the alternative? A world littered with weapons of mass destruction? Global norms are not idealistic fantasies. They are the way to avoid chaos. They are our hope for a safer future. They are the very embodiment of realism. They merit the support of all.