Open-ended Working Group

Panel VI – Reviewing the role of nuclear weapons in the security and other contexts of the twenty-first century, 12 May 2016

Statement by H.E. Veronika Bard, Permanent Representative of Sweden to the United Nations in Geneva

Mr. Chairman,

Sweden welcomes this opportunity to discuss nuclear weapons and security, which may allow us to better understand each other’s different perspectives and security concerns.

For centuries, security was defined almost entirely in terms of national survival needs. Security meant the protection of the state in a broad sense – its borders, its regime, its peoples, its institutions, its resources - from an external attack. This is something we all are familiar with and it’s entrenched in the UN Charter and various regional instruments. While some of its components have over time developed and allowed for more active engagement with other states, such as the rule of non-intervention or non-interference, it is still to a large extent relevant and central to national security. It is part of a state’s right to sovereignty.

States may agree to cooperate and create a collective security system, as exemplified in NATO:s Article 5, which allows for collective self-defense in the event of an aggression. It has been used in a situation that was probably not foreseen when the treaty was negotiated, as a response to a massive terror attack, but it is very much oriented towards collective security against military threats.

Mr. Chairman,

In this context nuclear weapons played a significant role during the Cold War, especially in Europe, with the two adversaries deploying huge amounts of nuclear weapons to counter what was perceived as the enemy’s superiority in conventional armed forces or nuclear forces. With the occasional misreading of the enemy’s intentions and the sometimes outright paranoid behavior of some decision makers, these times were very dangerous indeed.

It is clear that had an all-out war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact broken out, we would all have suffered catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences and mankind as such may have gone extinct.

But it is equally clear, that for many states during those years nuclear weapons were seen as their only option to ultimately deter a belligerent and threatening neighbor. A core
component to retain their national independence and sovereignty, which they argue also helped to preserve peace.

Even if the Cold War ended in the early 1990’s, unfortunately the security situation in Europe has worsened again over the last years. This is exemplified with the Russian Federation’s aggression towards Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea. As a result some states in Europe express strong concerns about their national security. In this context nuclear weapons again are perceived to play a role similar to the one they did during the Cold War.

Mr. Chairman,

Large groups of countries have instead found their security in the establishment of nuclear-weapons-free zones, some of them located in between countries that possess nuclear weapons. When looking at the six such zones, it is clear that many of their members to be, were also affected and drawn into the Cold War by the actions, covertly or overtly, of the main antagonists, including during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the build-up of nuclear arsenals and the presence of nuclear weapon states and their arsenals in Asia.

What we have in this OEWG is a situation where aspects and perceptions of national and regional security sometimes stand contrary to aspects of global security. Or another way of putting it: the national and regional security interests of fewer states are seen as contrary to the national and regional security interests of the majority of states.

This conflict between the national or collective security of a state or group of states through nuclear deterrence, and the global security of ALL states and peoples which is at risk because of the existence of nuclear weapons and the risk that these weapons will be used, is as serious as ever but nothing new in the nuclear arena. The Independent Commission on Disarmament Issues, chaired by the late Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, presented in 1982 its report with the concept of “Common Security”. The conclusion was that lasting security cannot be achieved unless it is shared by all and it can only be achieved through cooperation based on the principles on equity, justice and reciprocity.

As Olof Palme himself stated, “There can be no hope of victory in a nuclear war, all sides would be united in suffering and destruction. Survival is only possible together”. The Commission presented 48 proposals: most of them of on disarmament and arms control. But it did so underlining the need for reciprocity between the two military blocs, i.e., negotiated agreements taking into account the legitimate security concerns. It thus recognised that nuclear weapons did play a role in states’ national, collective and common security.

Mr. Chairman,

Sweden understands countries’ different views and respects states individual decisions to manage their own security, naturally and importantly within the boundaries of international
law, including International Humanitarian Law. We also expect an equal level of respect for the decisions on national security that my Government has taken.

That being said, my delegation does not believe that nuclear weapons should be part of this equation because of their catastrophic nature and their military inutility – it is indeed very difficult to see that there could be any use of nuclear weapons that would be compatible with International Humanitarian Law. We do not believe that regional and global security is served through the continued possession and modernization of nuclear arsenals and are very concerned about such counterproductive developments in the world of today. We are also very concerned about threats to use nuclear weapons, oral threats or implicit threats expressed through nuclear weapons exercises, some of them in our own neighbourhood. Such threats are unacceptable and dangerous.

Because of their disastrous nature and effects, and their use as political weapons and symbols of might, nuclear weapons in all its aspects affect us all. And as the North Korean example shows, one country's claim to security through nuclear weapons means another country's or other countries' insecurity. It makes non-proliferation efforts very difficult.

In my government’s view a sustainable regional and global peace cannot be built with nuclear weapons and this makes the work we conduct here more urgent and important than ever.

Mr. Chairman,

Common Security was developed further as states recognized that the human environment and natural resources were under threat and that this would affect us all – the concept of sustainable development was used in this context. Today we have the threat of climate change which is often listed, together with a war with nuclear weapons and a giant asteroid hitting earth, as a human civilization killer. It is notable that in this context, most recently in the negotiations on the Paris Agreement in COP21 to reduce and halt climate change, states had to take into account differing positions on what could be done while agreeing on the threat as such. Some states argued that they had a need for an affordable energy and industrial base to be able to build their national economies and bring wealth and prosperity to their populations, whereas other states argued that all states had to limit their emissions drastically to help save the planet. The end result was a compromise where both sides had influence in achieving the end result.

The lessons learned is that progress and agreement is possible, but that in order to involve states and have an effect on the world, states differing positions will need to be respected in the negotiations, and then a solution, a possible compromise sought out. This was necessary to meet the challenge of climate change and is probably also necessary to meet the nuclear weapons challenge and achieve and maintain a world free of nuclear weapons.