

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Background

The Conference on Disarmament (CD) is the world's sole multilateral disarmament treaty negotiating body. While the CD is independent of the United Nations, its secretary is appointed by the UN Secretary-General; it is required to consider recommendations from the General Assembly; and it submits reports annually or more often to the UN General Assembly.

The CD started out as the Eighteen Nations Disarmament Committee (ENDC) in March 1962 and then became the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament (CCD) in 1969, expanding to 30 members. The USA and the USSR jointly chaired both of these bodies. In 1983 the institution became the Conference on Disarmament and had 38 members until June of 1996 when the conference expanded to a membership of 61. In 1999, the membership expanded once again to a membership of 65 countries.

Groups and meetings

Groupings among the members include the Western Group, the Non-Aligned Movement (also known as the G21), the Group of Eastern European States and Others, the P5 (the five permanent members of the Security Council, which are the five NPT nuclear weapons states), and the P4 (the P5 minus China). China often refers to itself as the Group of One.

The name "Conference" might sound a bit misleading, as a one-time happening. The CD has three sessions each year, the first begins in the penultimate week of January and lasts for 10 weeks; the second begins in May and lasts seven weeks and the third, in July, lasts seven weeks. The CD hold one public plenary per week, usually on a Thursday, although it can have more, if appropriate. All open sessions are open to those holding a UN badge – however, NGO representatives are only allowed in the gallery and may not address the CD.

The chair of the Conference rotates every four working weeks, following the English alphabetical list of membership. All member states take turn chairing the CD for four weeks, which means every year sees six different Presidents. Since 2006, the six Presidents have increased their cooperation and coordination in order to build upon each other's work instead of repeating the work done during previous sessions.

Mandate and agenda

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The CD has a permanent agenda, also known as the Decalogue, which is the following

1. Nuclear weapons in all aspects;
2. Chemical weapons [removed from agenda in 1993 after the CD completed the Chemical Weapons Convention on 3 September 1992]
3. Other weapons of mass destruction;
4. Conventional weapons;
5. Reduction of military budgets;
6. Reduction of armed forces;
7. Disarmament and development;
8. Disarmament and international security
9. Collateral measures; confidence-building measures; effective verification methods in relation to appropriate disarmament measures, acceptable to all parties;
10. Comprehensive program of disarmament leading to general and complete disarmament under effective international control.

Most items on the CD agenda are discussed in ad hoc committees, held in private. The whole conference must agree by consensus to the mandate given to ad hoc committees. In 1994, four ad hoc committees met: Nuclear Test Ban, Outer Space, Negative Security Assurances and Transparency in Armaments. In 1995 and 1996, only one ad hoc committee met: Nuclear Test Ban. In 1996, the CD completed the negotiations for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The final negotiations were difficult and divisive issues remained to the end. Nevertheless, the CTBT was opened for signature September 24, 1996.

No program of activity has moved forward since 1996 and this disappointing fact put at risk the future of the consensus-based Conference on Disarmament. The CD has agreed to a fissile cut-off negotiating mandate but has been unable to establish an ad hoc committee needed to carry forward talks.

The CD holds most of the substantial debates in so called ad hoc committees that meet behind closed doors. This means only government representatives have access to the meetings. The lack of transparency in the CD and the disarmament machinery as a whole has been criticized. NGOs request more inclusion in the work of the CD, but so far this has not been realized. Many states' delegations have expressed statements in favor of increased civil society contribution. The issue arises every year in connection to the International Women's Day, 8 March. Women's organizations arrange a peace and disarmament conference in the UN every year at the International Women's Day, resulting in a statement to the CD. So far, representatives for the NGOs have not been allowed to deliver the statement themselves. Instead, the President or the Secretary General of the CD delivers the statement. The irony is clear when the President or SG – almost always a male – takes the podium to read out the opening phrase: “We, the women of the world...”

Consensus

The CD makes all its decisions by consensus. This means no decisions can be made unless all delegations in the CD agree. The principle of consensus has been widely criticized as blocking the work of the CD. It is difficult to reach an agreement among all 65 states, which sadly means the CD has faced more than a decade of deadlock since it concluded the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996. There have also been complaints over the fact that states blocking consensus are allowed to do so behind the scene with no mention in the official protocol.

Alternatives would be decision making by 2/3 or by majority. The problem is that even the decision of changing the consensus rule must be made by consensus. And not all states agree a majority voting system would be the best way of working.

What has the CD done?

The CD and its predecessors have negotiated such major multilateral arms limitation and disarmament agreements as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques; the seabed treaties; the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction; the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction; and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

Other treaties have been successfully negotiated outside the CD framework in order to speed up the process. The International Mine Ban Treaty is one such process.

What happens today?

Since 1996 the CD has faced more than a decade of deadlock. Following the failure of the 2005 NPT Review Conference, the pressure on the CD to get on with its work has increased.

During the 2006 and 2007 sessions the strengthened cooperation among the rotating Presidents has led to more efficient use of plenary sessions. Substantial debates were held on a number of issues, including Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS), a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT), nuclear disarmament, and negative security assurances. Special coordinators have been appointed to deal with issues of particular importance.

At the end of the 2007 session, the CD was close to agreement on a program of work (i.e., how to really work on the issues that the CD is mandated to deal with). The suggestion from the six Presidents is named L.1 and suggests four ambassadors to be appointed as coordinators for:

- substantial debate on nuclear disarmament and prevention of nuclear war
- negotiations without preconditions on an FMCT
- substantial debates on issues regarding an arms race in outer space
- substantial debates on how to secure non-nuclear weapon states from threat or use of nuclear weapons, so called Negative Security Assurances

States seem willing to resume substantial work in the CD. The issue most likely to start negotiations on is a treaty regarding fissile materials for nuclear weapons.