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What is the UN General Assembly?

The United Nations General Assembly is a consensus-building body, where issues of international peace and security are collectively discussed among all UN member states. Its regular session convenes in September of each year, and after two weeks of General Debate, it breaks up into six specialized committees. Every member state is entitled to participate in each of the committees, where they consider proposals relevant to the substantive topics covered by the committee, and recommend resolutions for adoption by the General Assembly. While these resolutions are not legally binding, they can be normative—that is, they can indicate the establishment of customs, standards, and guidelines for appropriate behavior. Resolutions adopted by consensus also indicate substantive areas of agreement that are ripe for negotiation and can enable the creation of new treaties and the emergence of international legal norms. Furthermore, they demonstrate global governmental opinion, showing which governments support peace and security, and which choose to remain outside of or even impede the development of international cooperative security.

Among many other things, the General Assembly discusses and makes recommendations on principles of cooperation for maintaining peace and security, including disarmament. Article 11 of the UN Charter authorizes the General Assembly to consider “the principles governing disarmament and the regulation of armaments,” and empowers it to make recommendations based on these principles to member states and the Security Council. The very first resolution adopted by the General Assembly in 1946 called for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” Every year, the General Assembly adopts 40-50 resolutions on disarmament and nonproliferation by a majority vote or by consensus.

GA 1st Committee

The General Assembly's work on disarmament is conducted through one of its main committees, the First Committee on Disarmament and International Security. The First Committee provides space for each state to discuss their positions on disarmament-related matters, and to work together to come up with compromises or to propose language or tools to better understand and approach the issues. It offers the opportunity for states to build consensus on the issues, to reach common understandings and principles and to agree on norms of behavior. Thus rather than ensuring “security” through the size of their arsenals, governments can discuss how to best arrive at cooperative security arrangements that minimize spending on weapons, reduce arms production, trade, and stockpiles, and increase global security. This consensus can subsequently be used in other disarmament fora, such as the Conference on Disarmament, where disarmament treaties are negotiated.

Challenges for disarmament work

While the First Committee offers many opportunities in principle, it often fails to make good use of its potential. There is a discord of perceptions between member states—the way one state perceives elements of and challenges to its security often differ widely from the way other states perceive their own situations, or the global situation. Thus discussion in the First Committee is largely static—there is limited acknowledgment of other states' perspectives, and a lack of flexibility in re-examining one's own perspective. The rigidity of this process is mostly determined by the capitals—delegates to the General Assembly are generally required to “toe the party line”, and reflect the beliefs, values, and doctrines of their governments.

Statements delivered in First Committee reveal important fault lines in the disarmament debate that impede progress in disarmament, nonproliferation, peace, and security. Some states have become entrenched in their positions, and do not listen to the arguments or suggestions of others. They reject the norms of the majority—who have arrived at a common understanding through discussion, debate, and compromise—and oppose resolutions that would otherwise demonstrate consensus on many disarmament-related issues. In turn, these time-hardened positions have given rise to a number of static annual resolutions. Rather than a political forum for debate on key issues, the First Committee has turned into a resolution-generating machine, from which repetitive, redundant resolutions are tabled and voted on year after year.

Background – The first special session on disarmament

The General Assembly, by its resolution 502 (VI) of January 1952, created the United Nations Disarmament Commission under the Security Council with a general mandate on disarmament questions. However, it met only occasionally after 1959.

One big highlight of the disarmament conversation happened in June 1978. The First Special Session on Disarmament (known as SSOD1) occurred at a time when the psychotic nature of the nuclear and conventional arms race was apparent even to its principle actors. The document that resulted from the First Special Session on Disarmament outlined a consensus disarmament agenda, as yet unfulfilled.

SSOD1 established a successor Disarmament Commission (UNDC) as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly, composed of all Member States of the United Nations. The Disarmament Commission was created as a deliberative body, with the function of considering and making recommendations on various problems in the field of disarmament and of following up on the relevant decisions and recommendations of the special session.

UN Disarmament Commission - Mandate and meetings

The UNDC makes no decisions but functions as a deliberative body for member states. The commission can make suggestions and recommendations on issues related to disarmament, as well as follow up decisions and recommendations from the Special Sessions.

The UNDC, which meets for three weeks in the spring, operates in plenary meetings and working groups, the number of working groups depending on the number of substantive items on its agenda. The five geographical groups take turns assuming the chairmanship of the UNDC, while the chairmen of the working groups are selected in accordance with the principle of equitable geographical distribution. It reports annually to the General Assembly. In the light of its function, the UNDC focuses on a limited number of agenda items at each session.

For some years at the beginning of the 21st century the UNDC has had no activity. In December 2005 the UNDC finally adopted a substantive agenda. This came as somewhat of a surprise, as the Commission had been without an agenda for three years and the United States had declined to participate in the consensus adoption of the 2005 First Committee resolution on the Disarmament Commission. The United States had also blocked consensus on adopting an agenda at the Commission's 2005 organizational meeting, in disagreement over the agenda item on nuclear disarmament. In 2006 the UNDC produced a number of discussion papers but with no consensus on anything but procedural reports. The DC remained saturated with tension between the United States and Iran, and the two engaged in a verbal duel at the final session of the Commission. During the 2007 session, the UNDC's nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation working group made some headway. The Chair, Ambassador Zinsou of Benin, produced a paper that was relatively well received. However, after nearly a week of additions, the paper grew to a formidable 16 pages, turning into more of a compilation of views than a document of consensus recommendations. On the suggestion of several governments, he resubmitted a relatively short simple paper that could be agreed upon, but was clearly the lowest-common denominator and deficient in disarmament.¹ The Report of the Disarmament Commission for 2007 notes that the Chair hopes his working paper “will be a basis for further deliberations for the formulation of consent recommendations” at the end of 2008.

1 <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/dc/papers07/WP4.pdf>