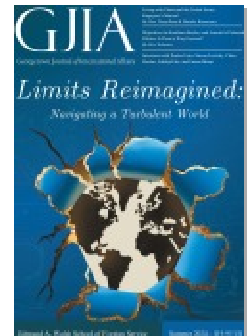
Adedeji Ebo on Multilateral Disarmament and "Trust Deficit Disorder"



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Adedeji Ebo on Multilateral Disarmament and “Trust Deficit Disorder”

Adedeji Ebo

Abstract. *In 2022, annual global military expenditure reached a record high of $2,240 billion.*[1] *Much of the recent increase in spending is directly linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which itself represents a failure of the global institutions that are meant to prevent and manage such conflicts.*[2] *Adedeji Ebo, Director and Deputy to the United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, spoke to GJIA about the challenges facing multilateralism and how international arms control can adapt in response.*

GJIA: Your work has largely focused on disarmament efforts related to the control of conventional weapons. I’m curious how the strategies and partnerships relevant to conventional weapons disarmament—and even the fundamental goals of that work—differ from chemical or nuclear disarmament.

Adedeji Ebo: At the outset, let me share that categorizing disarmament and arms control into weapons typology (such as conventional, nuclear, biological, and chemical), while nominally useful, is of limited impactful value. Weapons typologies as well as potential domains for conflict are increasingly interconnected. Think, for example, about advancements in science and technology and potential new domains of conflict, such as cyberspace. All digital systems are at risk for cyberattacks—including nuclear weapons systems, which in turn heightens nuclear risk.

More importantly, the foundational and fundamental basis of disarmament and arms control is *people,* not weapons. Disarmament is not merely technical but politically conditioned. Both points—that disarmament and arms control are in essence about political actions and people coming together to take action—have clearly played out in history, with regards to both nuclear and conventional disarmament and arms control.

It was people—states, civil society actors, international organizations, survivors—that came together to put a stop to the immense suffering posed by landmines, for example. These joint efforts led to the Antipersonnel Mine Ban Convention in 1997, and the results of that treaty speak for themselves. While a handful of countries have not joined it, the vast majority of states have vouched never to use or produce these indiscriminate weapons, have destroyed their stockpiles, and are clearing land of unexploded ordnance, making it safe again for civilians. The flip side is that implementation and adherence to agreed international norms, treaties, and other forms of cooperation are in our hands, too, and subject to political will, cooperation, dialogue, and accountability. Regrettably, we have seen far

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Interview conducted by Itai Abraham.

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too many examples in recent years of disregard for such agreements, often with civilians paying the highest price.

What these examples also show is that, when we think and talk about disarmament, we must focus on the real impact of weapons on people, sustainable development, and the environment, among others. For example, disturbingly, small arms and light weapons are the weapons of choice in initiating, sustaining, and exacerbating conflict, armed violence, terrorism, and other forms of organized crime. Their misuse facilitates human rights violations and gender-based violence. According to the latest figure, in 2021 alone, 260,000 people were killed by small arms amounting to 45% of all global violent deaths.[3]

While from its very first resolution, the United Nations General Assembly has resolved to eliminate nuclear weapons, some 12,500 nuclear weapons still remain in our world today. Just one of those can destroy a whole city, not to mention jeopardize the natural environment and lives of future generations through its long-term catastrophic effects.

So, when you consider disarmament and arms control not as narrowly technical, but as inherently political processes with the primary goal of safeguarding people and the planet, the fundamental objective must be promoting and sustaining peace within and between states. The multiplicity of actors, especially in UN multilateralism, necessitates partnerships and strategies to achieve global peace and security. It is the strategies for specific objectives towards these goals that often necessarily differ, partly because different weapons-types threaten human existence differently. Therefore, whether they are conventional, chemical, or biological weapons the fundamental goal of disarmament is the same: to govern the tools of war, either through their elimination or by placing them under strict control. Regardless of any particular weapons-type, the fundamental question for disarmament—particularly from the perspective of conflict prevention, which is central to the purpose and objective of the UN—is to address the rationales behind why states and societies arm themselves in the first place, against whom, and why. In this regard, we should remain constantly aware that disarmament efforts take place within a particular political economy and are conditioned by the primacy of politics.

With that analytical framework in mind, there are indeed important differences in disarmament approaches. Between conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) disarmament, for example, the focus of the latter is the complete elimination of those weapons, while the focus of the former is more diffuse.

Thus, we seek to achieve total elimination of WMD through the universal adoption of verifiable treaties and other instruments. The Chemical and Biological Weapon Conventions impose complete prohibitions, while the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons contains binding commitments to pursue the elimination of nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons does ban nuclear weapons for its members, but that treaty is still in its nascency.

In the area of conventional arms, the picture is more diverse. Some subcategories of conventional arms such as cluster munitions, anti-personnel landmines, and those captured in the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), which fall within the realm of humanitarian disarmament, have been banned. For certain other conventional arms and ammunition, the focus is not necessarily on a prohibition or total elimination but on enhancing their control or regulation. This is done with a view to reducing risks associated with diversion, illicit trafficking, proliferation, and misuse, as well as impacts on human rights, peace and security, and sustainable development.

However, in terms of strategies and partnerships, these remain mostly the same for both the WMD and conventional arms spheres. We seek to work primarily with Member States to create binding obligations and with civil society and other experts to raise awareness about the dangers posed by these weapons.

GJIA: A few years ago, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke of a "trust deficit disorder," alluding to a diminishing faith in the political establishment.[4] That quote appears in UNODA's most recent strategic plan in reference to trust in multilateral institutions specifically.[5] Do you agree with this assessment of multilateralism? Is there anything you have noticed, in your work or otherwise, that either supports, qualifies, or refutes this position?

Adedeji Ebo: Regrettably, this trust deficit persists and is increasing. In fact, the Secretary-General recently said that the world is at an "inflection point in history," noting that people are "turning their backs on the values of trust and solidarity in one another."[6] Yet, trust and solidarity are the critical values we need to ensure a more peaceful and sustainable future. It is clear that our global response and multilateral system are struggling to effectively address today's complex, interconnected, and rapidly changing challenges.

GJIA: If you agree that the trend exists, has the waning faith in multilateralism affected your work in international disarmament?

Adedeji Ebo: The direct and candid response to your question is "yes," sadly so. The trust deficit has further deadlocked the entire disarmament machinery, within a global context of accentuating insecurity and instability. As I indicated earlier, disarmament is not a mere technical exercise. It is indeed a mirror, and perhaps even a measure, of the state of international and global affairs. As the Secretary-General remarked in the same speech referenced in your question, "people are feeling troubled and insecure."[7] The net effect of this trend on the disarmament field is the tendency for states and societies to arm themselves, rather than disarm. That is the directional impact of the "trust deficit disorder" on disarmament: the drive towards a culture of war rather than a culture of peace.

For a start and most alarmingly, the risk of a nuclear weapon being used—whether intentionally, by miscalculation, or by accident—is at the highest point in decades. Then, there are the rapid advances in conventional weapon technologies. At the same time, technological advances are threatening to drive armed conflict into new domains, such as cyber and outer space. The impact of science and technology can be seen with drones and artificial intelligence, complicated by their dual use. All of this is happening against a backdrop of increasing levels of geopolitical tensions and major power competition. To be clear, we are in an era of more competition, more contestation, more uncertainty, fewer guardrails, and indeed, greater danger. The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis are resounding reminders of the limits of state-centric approaches and the difference between *international* security and *global* security, with the latter being the more relevant paradigm for today's world.

As I mentioned, disarmament cannot be divorced from its political economy. The Secretary-General has repeatedly pointed out that an imbalance in the global political system sustains the underdevelopment of many countries. This, in turn, affects both stability and the possibility to generate the trust that is required to jointly tackle today's supranational challenges.

A system characterized and sustained by imbalance cannot produce political stability due to the inherent disequilibrium. Yet, the "trust deficit disorder" cannot be sustainably addressed without stability. This is part of the troubled water and undercurrent in which the ship of disarmament is sailing. Indeed, if the current trend of trust deficit continues, the prospects for multilateral disarmament are rather bleak.

GJIA: How can the disarmament projects you oversee build or diminish faith in multilateral cooperation generally?

Adedeji Ebo: Just as lack of dialogue and resorting to arms in response to the "trust deficit disorder" is a conscious choice, so too can cooperation and collaboration build trust within and between states and societies and help enhance the prospects for disarmament. We were all reminded of this abiding choice by the Secretary-

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General through his policy brief *The New Agenda for Peace*, which seeks to encourage countries to choose peace over war.[8] The report advocates more effective multilateral solutions by offering concrete and ambitious recommendations that recognize the interlinked nature of these challenges while also proposing strong measures at the global, regional, and national levels.

The New Agenda for Peace has a strong focus on disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation, seeking ways to build confidence and trust between states. This includes generating broad support for the elimination and non-proliferation of WMD, developing "human-centered disarmament" through curbing military expenditures and focusing on the human cost of weapons, ensuring effective control of conventional weapons, focusing on the humanitarian dimensions of disarmament, and regulating new technologies. It also highlights a number of confidence-building measures that the Office for Disarmament Affairs oversees to promote military transparency, including the UN Report on Military Expenditures and the Register of Conventional Arms.

This year, Member States will convene at the Summit of the Future, which will be an important opportunity to reaffirm and bolster shared principles and to discuss solutions to deliver for the people and planet more effectively.[9] At the Summit, states are expected to adopt a "Pact for the Future" to cement collective agreements and to showcase global solidarity for current and future generations. We hope that disarmament will be an important component of that pact.

GJIA: Is disarmament necessarily more effective as a multilateral process? Is it possible to compare a UN arms convention with a bilateral nonproliferation treaty between, say, Russia and the United States, which accounts for a majority of global military spending?

Adedeji Ebo: Multilateral solutions are the most effective because they create commitments and obligations for a much larger group of countries. Ideally, they are universal in application. Historically, international norms and institutions related to disarmament and international peace and security have proven to be stronger and more durable, especially when they have been inclusive. Multilateral treaties and arrangements can also be more effective because their implementation can be supported by international organizations and a diverse range of stakeholders, such as civil society organizations.

For example, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) derives much of its success not only from its legally binding disarmament commitments and verifiable non-proliferation obligations but also from its near universal status, which means that those commitments and obligations are binding on the vast majority of the international community. Particularly when it comes to nuclear weapons, any use of a nuclear weapon would have global ramifications. Therefore, it is essential that all countries are engaged in, play a role in, and have a say in the efforts to bring about their elimination.

The nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime is made up of a variety of multilateral, plurilateral, regional, bilateral, and even unilateral treaties, instruments, and initiatives. Each of these plays an important role in maintaining the norms against the use, proliferation, and testing of nuclear weapons and in bringing about their elimination.

This is especially the case for the series of bilateral strategic nuclear arms control treaties between the United States and the Russian Federation (and previously the Soviet Union). Possessing by far the largest nuclear arsenals, these two countries have a special responsibility to reduce their stocks of nuclear weapons. It is distressing to note that many of the critical bilateral and regional arms control arrangements that helped promote stability during the Cold War, and in the years after, have been lost or are crumbling.

It should furthermore be highlighted that multilateral treaties also facilitate other forms of cooperation. For example, Article VI of the NPT, which was opened for signature in 1968, helped to facilitate the US-Soviet arms control process, and Article VII of the NPT acted

as a basis for the creation of regional nuclear-weapon-free zones. The outcome documents from NPT Review Conferences also contain commitments by individual or groups of countries to disarmament.[10]

GJIA: Diverse participation and ownership of all stakeholders in the process of disarmament work is crucial for successful implementation in the long term. How has the scope of the relevant stakeholders and partners in disarmament broadened over time, and who are some of the newer, unconventional players in these efforts?

Adedeji Ebo: The challenges the world is facing are multiple and complex. No one leader, no one country, no one organization can solve these challenges on their own. That is why working with diverse partners is so critical and a key part of our work.

Partnerships allow us to amplify the UN's voice, engage more deeply with different perspectives, acquire and share on-the-ground knowledge, present a more cohesive and holistic viewpoint on disarmament, and better serve Member States and other stakeholders. Regional and sub-regional organizations, think tanks, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders have unique and complementary capacities that contribute substantially to the fulfillment of our mission. Within the UN system, partnerships with other entities in the peace and security pillar and across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus ensure impactful and holistic responses and produce the necessary multiplier effect for efforts to be sustainable.

Our Office did a stakeholder mapping exercise in 2020 that revealed that we engage with over 100 entities from a diverse array of regions and categories. Currently, some 40 percent of our activities are implemented in coordination with regional and subregional organizations. This broad range of activities has included structured dialogues with organizations, on-the-ground capacity building to security sector officials, convening of experts, provision of advice to strengthen implementation of treaties, and joint outreach with partners to raise awareness about and find solutions to new and emerging challenges.

We believe strongly that working together with a wide range of actors—other UN entities, regional organizations, the private sector, and civil society—is integral to effective action in the disarmament field. To enhance our engagement with partnerships of all types, our Office is currently developing its first dedicated partnership strategy.

ODA pursues partnerships that align with our core mission and are built on values such as transparency and inclusivity.[11] We hope that, by concretizing these approaches through an ODA partnership strategy, we will strengthen our efforts to more effectively and integrally locate disarmament within the peace and security pillar and across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Furthermore, an enhanced focus on non-traditional partnerships will help us diversify our support base and demonstrate our appeal to new constituencies. One possible example would be aligning nuclear disarmament with climate change advocates and combining advocacy on these two major existential threats facing humanity.

Another key focus is on integrating youth voices into disarmament conversations and providing them with a dedicated space to inspire and influence decisions, especially on issues that will impact the world they will inherit. This is the principal objective of our *Youth4Disarmament* platform, established in 2019, through which our Office provides meaningful and inclusive opportunities for young people to participate in the key discussions taking place in the disarmament and non-proliferation field.[12] Youth voices—underpinned by energy, creativity, and, above all, commitment to a better world—are of vital importance to our common future.

We need young people, as the leaders of tomorrow, to act today. One pathway to youth empowerment is disarmament and non-proliferation education. Building on the multiplier effect of working with and through educators, academics, trainers, and others working to promote a broader culture of peace, we aim to deliver tailored and authoritative knowledge

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and skills, empowering critical citizens capable of promoting disarmament goals.

GJIA: What are the ways you can link disarmament to development, or to progress on human rights and equity issues? Are these simultaneous processes, or is some degree of progress toward disarmament a prerequisite for sustainable, equitable development?

Adedeji Ebo: Even though currently undergoing reinforcement, the linkages between disarmament and development are not new. In fact, Article 26 of the UN Charter establishes a connection between disarmament and economic well-being. Agenda 2030 also firmly plants disarmament within the context of sustainable development through Action 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.[13]

Disarmament for development is indeed one of the key priorities in the *New Agenda for Peace*, focusing on how various disarmament actions can more directly contribute to development efforts and be situated within UN development processes.

Looking at conventional arms, for example, the diversion, proliferation, and misuse of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and ammunition generates insecurity, triggers violence, exacerbates armed conflict, fosters organized crime and terrorism, and can enable human rights abuses. Therefore, effective SALW and ammunition control—including through implementation of the international and regional instruments to prevent, detect, and address diversion—can play a key role in preventing armed conflicts, reducing armed violence, and creating conducive conditions for sustainable peace and development. In this way, disarmament can serve as both a prerequisite and an accelerator for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Likewise, progress on the sustainable development goals can address some of the drivers of illicit SALW use, including inequalities, insecurity, and high levels of impunity. Therefore, these are mutually reinforcing processes; progress in one allows for progress in the other.

The Secretary-General's New Agenda for Peace is an important opportunity for a more integrated and holistic people-centered approach to peace and security and development. A more human-centered approach also speaks to the connection between disarmament, reduction of violence, and the promotion of human rights by addressing some of the weapon systems that enact such a terrible toll on civilians. Hence, ODA has been strengthening its efforts to overcome the traditional siloed approach in the field of disarmament and enhance the partnerships and networks with a broad range of stakeholders.

Within the UN, we are making some important progress in placing disarmament on the development agenda. For example, through the *Saving Lives Entity* (SALIENT) and with support from the country-based UN Resident Coordinators (RCs), we assist countries with significant small arms and armed violence challenges in addressing them from a development perspective, prioritizing sustainable impact and national ownership. In addition, we are working with the RCs themselves to integrate small arms proliferation issues into the UN's own Common Country Analyses and the Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

GJIA: The most recent data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows that global military expenditures reached a new record in 2022 due in large part to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While this is an obvious setback for ongoing disarmament efforts in the short term, do you think it will help bolster support for multilateral disarmament in the wake of this conflict?

Adedeji Ebo: As mentioned before, the international security landscape is increasingly complex and contentious. Heightened geopolitical tensions and military aggression, the progressive modernization of weapons systems, and the lack of transparency, trust, and dialogue have brought the world to a critical point. In response, states are undertaking expensive military build-up programs, implementing large procurement plans, and developing more sophisticated weapons.

These developments are therefore evident in armament trends. According to SIPRI, world military expenditures rose by 3.7 percent in real terms to $2,240 billion in 2022, reaching the highest level ever recorded.[14] Global spending grew by 19 percent over the decade 2013–22 and has increased every year since 2015.[15] As stated in your question, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a major driver of the growth in spending in 2022. Factoring in the plans announced by some states to boost military budgets in response to the current security landscape—including Russia's invasion of Ukraine—this figure is estimated to rise sharply in the coming years. It is worth stressing, however, that the upward trend in military expenditure and the political conditions that drove them did not begin with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although it is now an accelerating driver.

In this environment of uncertainty and volatility, transparency plays a crucial role. I have not talked about transparency much so far, but it is indeed a prerequisite for arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation. Transparency acts as a confidence-building measure with the potential to contribute to the prevention and reduction of ambiguities and tensions among countries. It can pave the way for international cooperation and decrease the chances of mistakes or miscalculations. Transparency can also encourage mutual restraint in arms transfers and military budgeting and decelerate military build-ups, paving the way for more balanced approaches to security that put people and people's needs at the center.

Through increased transparency, raising awareness of existing multilateral instruments, and underscoring their continued relevance (such as the UN Register of Conventional Arms and the UN Military Expenditure Database), we can indeed bolster support for multilateral disarmament. It is important that these vital transparency and confidence-building instruments remain fit for purpose by keeping pace with ongoing developments in military production. Additionally, there is a need for more positive engagement at regional and subregional levels to bolster a culture of transparency and build confidence among neighboring states where contexts permit.

In addition, depending on the choices we make—and I mean the collective "we" as a global community—the unprecedented rise in military expenditure can also "help bolster support for multilateral disarmament," as you put it in your question. If we consider these alarming military expenditure data as a wake-up call, then indeed it may turn out to, ironically, have a positive impact on the future of multilateral disarmament. If these data, on the other hand, feed into our fears and anxieties about the "inevitability" of conflict, the reverse will be the outcome. The choice is ours to make.

Notes

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