

Research Report

General Assembly

2 | COVID-19 and its implications for disarmament

Table of Contents

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| Table of Contents | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Definition of Key Terms | 4 |
| Current State of Affairs | 5 |
| Major Countries and Organizations | 6 |
| Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue | 8 |
| Possible Solutions | 9 |
| Questions to Consider | 10 |
| Bibliography | 11 |

Introduction

The General Assembly is perhaps one of the most vital organs of the United Nations; it is the only council in which every single member state has equal representation. As the name suggests, it functions to discuss a wide range of topics; the concept it tends to discuss the most, however, is peacekeeping in all its forms.

The First Committee, GA1, deals with disarmament and international security. This is very generalized, however, it covers some of the most important issues and situations we face today. The committee deals with global challenges and threats to peace that affect the international community. It seeks out solutions to challenges faced in regard to the international security regime. The committee conquers matters within the scope of the UN Charter and relating to the powers and functions of any other organ on the United Nations. Aspects such as governing disarmament, regulating armament, maintenance of international peace, promotion of cooperative arrangements, and measures directed towards strengthening stability through lower levels of armaments. The First Committee is a vital organ that contributes a great deal towards the United Nations.

Disarmament has been one of the main concerns of the United Nations for decades and the urgency of this topic has only been growing each year with an increased threat of advanced weaponry and potential warfare. The recent situation of the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19) was a development unexpected by the entire global community, but has affected every aspect of government and society and revealed many structural weak-points. Lockdowns and social-distancing measures have changed the way we live—most citizens are confined within their households, the quality and accessibility of education has deteriorated, millions have lost their jobs while others have lost their lives and healthcare workers endanger themselves every day for the benefit of society.

The pandemic does not respect borders, political views, or wealth. Straining the resources of each country and causing tensions to rise amongst member states, COVID-19 has affected almost every topic imaginable, however, the effect on disarmament could be the one with the most long-term, lasting damage.

Definition of Key Terms

Disarmament

The reduction, limitation or withdrawal of military forces (such as the army, navy and air force) and weapons of a country. Disarmament is one of the main functions of the General Assembly and works towards collective disarmament and security.

Non-Proliferation

The prevention of an increase or spread of something, especially the number of countries possessing nuclear weapons. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons is a well-established treaty in the GA that focuses on this.

Non-State Actors

An individual or organization that has significant political influence but is not allied to any particular country or state.

Nuclear Deterrence

The military doctrine according to which the possibility that a country will use the nuclear weapons it possesses in retaliation will deter an enemy from attacking.

Nuclear Weapons

A nuclear weapon is a bomb or missile that uses nuclear energy to cause an explosion. The use of nuclear weapons in the past few decades has increased drastically, making it an area of concern for GA1.

Biological Weapons

A biological weapon is a biological pathogen or toxin, such as the anthrax bacterium or the smallpox virus, that has been prepared for release on the battlefield or within a civilian population in sufficient concentration to cause widespread illness or death. Also called *bioweapon*.

Current State of Affairs

Currently, it has been just over a year since the beginning of COVID-19 and although this means that long-term implications haven't yet been revealed, there is already enough evidence for the negative effects of COVID-19 on disarmament to cause concern. Firstly, this decade has seen one of the highest increases in spendings thus far. According to the International Institute for Peace, \$73 billion was spent globally on nuclear weapons in 2019 alone (Hajnoczi), which not only signalled for the credibility of nuclear deterrence to be unreliable but also spent a large percentage of all nations' expenditure on weapons instead of alternative industries that would have increased the global preparedness for the pandemic. The great toll COVID-19 has taken on many economies only adds to this, as both unemployment and healthcare costs are rising and there is a growing scarcity of resources nationally and internationally.

One of the most pressing matters during COVID-19 has been the postponement of several vital disarmament conferences and reviews. These conferences are key to inspecting the efforts and situation of the parties and countries involved in the agreement and ensuring it is upheld. Miscommunication and distrust due to a lack of evidence for this can quickly become a wedge between countries. One example is the postponement of the 2020 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which is a long-standing breakthrough since 1968. The same was done for the Seventh Biennial Meeting of States (BMS7), with an agenda on the Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons. COVID-19 has played a role in the internal affairs of many countries and worsened national issues. The current socio-economic and healthcare situation mentioned previously hit some communities much harder than others, which has resulted in tension and armed violence. "Women and girls, in particular, are suffering a dramatic increase in cases of domestic and gender-based violence, where small arms have long played a deadly role." (Nakamitsu). Furthermore, the threat to civilian life and workers in conflict-prone or warring areas has worsened, as the use of explosive weapons in populated areas disrupts and destroys the essential infrastructure desperately required to contain the pandemic.

The pandemic has amplified the already-strained tensions between certain nuclear-armed member states, with accusations and debates of whom the responsibility of COVID-19 falls on, notably between the United States of America and China. However, no state is prepared to respond in the case of a nuclear weapon detonation. Finally, the pandemic has increased concerns on the threat posed by biological weapons, especially their use by non-state actors.

Major Countries and Organizations

United States of America (USA)

The United States (US) was one of the worst affected nations in the world by COVID-19, with over 29 million total reported cases. The last American President, Donald Trump, had argued that in future the virus will not expose the limitations of the US forces, including the nuclear services, to the world. This clarification, however, raised concerns among others about the transparency of nuclear forces of great powers. Concern rose both within the US and from foreign members when US officials stated the virus would not affect nuclear preparedness, criticizing the government's attention on a nuclear war instead of tackling the pandemic. "The US remains the world's largest arms exporter, increasing its global share of arms exports from 32 to 37 percent. Almost half (47 percent) of US arms transfers went to the Middle East." ("Global Arms Trade Plateauing Amid COVID-19"). The nation has withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Iran nuclear deal, and unsigned the Arms Trade Treaty. Relations between the US and Russia (another major nuclear power) are at risk over arms control and the development of weapons.

China

The origin of the coronavirus being China, the US and China have been part of a diplomatic and political conflict for the past year. Ex-US President Donald Trump placed the blame of spreading the virus on China, spurring tensions between the two despite already-strained relations. Although Chinese President Xi Jinping wishes to resolve any conflicts through 'dialogue and negotiation', critics are wary of the conflict and have even gone so far as to consider the potential of another 'Cold War'. The continuation of this conflict could have disastrous outcomes, as both parties are nuclear-armed and many fear that deterrence will not be maintained.

The European Union (EU)

The UK has recently decided to increase their nuclear arsenal, raising its stockpile of nuclear warheads. This decision is slowing down, if not ending, the UK's gradual nuclear disarmament policy. Amongst many member states in the EU, there is a division on the urgency to achieve nuclear disarmament and its progress.

Iran

COVID-19 had a large impact on Iran, with significant effects on the healthcare system and disruptions in the economy. However, Iran's nuclear program is once again expanding and in

question by several parties. In March 2020, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which monitors atomic activity in several nations, called upon Iran to immediately cooperate with the agency by providing its inspectors access to sites which Iran had denied in the past. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, was signed between world powers and Iran in 2015. "Under its terms, Iran agreed to dismantle much of its nuclear program and open its facilities to more extensive international inspections in exchange for billions of dollars' worth of sanctions relief." ("What Is The Iran Nuclear Deal?"). The US had withdrawn from the deal while Iran continued to violate it in noncompliance. Recently, US President Biden negotiated joining the deal again if also allowed to consider Iran's missile program, which Iran rejected.

Syria

In 2013, resolution 2118 mandating the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons programme was passed. However, since then, the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) stated that there had been no further communication with Syrian authorities regarding the implementation of this resolution. Due to COVID-19, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was unable to deploy to Syria and inspect the situation, however, there are still ongoing efforts to verify the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons program.

United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR)

"Operating since 1980, UNIDIR is an autonomous, voluntarily funded institution within the United Nations that conducts independent research on disarmament and related problems; particularly international security issues." ("UNIDIR | The United Nations Institute For Disarmament Research")

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Treaties and resolutions prior to COVID-19

The world and the UN has been working to globally disarm since the aftermath of the Second World War, with breakthroughs in disarmament over the years such as the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I, 1991), the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II, 1979).

Attempts to solve the issue during COVID-19

In response to the restrictions of in-person meetings and conferences posed by COVID-19, the UN and member states have worked to digitalise work in a virtual setting to maintain efficiency and keep track of any developments. The Group of Governmental Experts conducted virtual discussions from the 20th to 24th April in 2020 concerning the “Problems arising from the accumulation of conventional ammunition stockpiles in surplus”. The Biological Weapons Convention Implementation Support Unit also organized a webinar in May to discuss responses to biological incidents. This was overall successful as the convention resulted in a prospective fissile material cut-off treaty. “While a handful of States have made commitments to reduce military spending in favour of fighting COVID-19, several States have recently decided to proceed with major arms deals.”, stated Izumi Nakamitsu, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs.

23 March 2020: UN appeal for a global ceasefire

In March 2020, the Secretary-General of the UN appealed for an immediate, global ceasefire between all nations to pause warfare and provide aid to those in conflict-ridden areas. This is partly in response to the use of heavy explosive weapons in populated and urban areas, which is not only a threat to civilian life but is also causing the destruction of essential infrastructure in the battle against COVID—water, electricity, sanitation and healthcare services. This includes the bombing and shelling of cities in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen. While international support for the appeal came from over 115 governments and 16 non-state armed groups, several parties have chosen to ignore it.

22 January 2021: ‘Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons’ enters into force

In 2017, the General Assembly convened to negotiate a binding treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. The treaty mandates the prohibition of developing, testing, stockpiling and threatening to use nuclear weapons as well as deployment on national territory. The treaty entered into force in January 2021 following 50 ratifications from member states.

Possible Solutions

Disarmament has been a goal of GA1 for several years now and has been in question and the subject of debate long before the rise of COVID-19 and its implications. Since the first meetings and resolutions, it has been clear that all member states hold different views and stances on the extent to which disarmament should be achieved and on which fronts it should be restricted. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that possible solutions for this topic will largely overlap with general solutions and proposals for disarmament in general, such as preventive measures against lethal weapons.

Considering the strain on resources and struggling economies, one of the first steps would be redirecting national and government expenditure on arms and weapons innovation towards economic zones of priority during COVID, such as healthcare, employment and poverty. A part of this may be restricting government spending on defence, arms programmes and nuclear weapons through budgets or limits.

It is imperative that steps be taken to combat the rising tensions between nations and foreign policy changes due to COVID-19. Allowing tensions and conflicts to worsen between nuclear-armed nations in a time when economic instability and internal affairs are already prominent is unaffordable. To address this, steps should be taken that intensify and accelerate nuclear disarmament as well as encourage nuclear deterrence. Another effective means to de-escalate the issue could be the enforcement of risk-reduction and preventive measures, such as de-alerting and no-first-use policies. The concerned member states must come to an agreement or compromise, possibly by diplomatic effort or mediation. Naturally, this would involve conducting conferences and meetings through non-contact means, such as virtual meetings. Moreover, this would also provide assurance between nations of their progress in disarmament, due to the hindrance in arms inspections caused by the pandemic.

Lastly, technological progress might well allow states or terrorist groups to manufacture a synthetic pathogen. After COVID-19, work on strengthening the biological weapons convention now seems more urgent than before. If the need for further action arises, the creation of an international monitoring system for the surveillance of viruses and other biological agents could be proposed. It is important to keep in mind the root causes of the issue at hand and the multifaceted implications that COVID-19 has on disarmament to create effective solutions. The pandemic may be a short-term concern, but disarmament is needed now more than ever, and COVID-19 presents the opportunity to strive for nuclear disarmament.

Questions to Consider

1. Is your member state involved in any way in this issue? If yes, how have they acted and participated or addressed the problem?
2. Disarmament has been a long-term topic of discussion for many years now—in what ways has the rise of COVID-19 changed the situation?
3. What new challenges is the United Nations faced with the rise of COVID-19? How can they be addressed and effectively solved in this conference?
4. What has been your member state's priority both economically and politically during COVID-19? Are these priorities justifiable and how have they impacted disarmament?
5. What are some potential solutions and risk-reduction measures for disarmament during COVID-19?
6. How has COVID-19 affected your country's foreign policy and relations with other member states?
7. Which treaties and agreements has your nation signed?

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