

Sean Howard Speaks with the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs



Secretary-General António Guterres during presentation the An Agenda for Disarmament at a University Dufour in Geneva. 24 May 2018. UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré

In [a speech at the University of Geneva](#) on May 24, UN Secretary-General (SG) António Guterres launched a new ‘Agenda for Disarmament’ – [Securing Our Common Future](#) – designed to revitalize and refocus efforts to achieve the core objective the UN Charter to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” To establish a system of common security and peaceful, cooperative relations sufficiently equitable and dependable to lead to the ‘general and complete disarmament’ of international affairs.

After establishing – in often terrifying detail – the ‘Need for a New Disarmament Agenda,’ the Agenda lays out proposals for achieving ‘Disarmament to Save Humanity,’ ‘Disarmament That Saves Lives’ and ‘Disarmament for Future Generations,’

before exploring ways and means of 'Strengthening Partnerships for Disarmament.' In his conclusion, 'The Way Forward,' the Secretary-General insists "disarmament must be brought back to the centre of our common efforts for peace and security" and issues an urgent appeal to all to "use every opportunity to carry forward momentum for disarmament where it exists, and to generate new impetus where it is needed, in order to achieve a safer and more secure world for all."

Technically a 'non-paper' – meaning it establishes no new official policy or obligations – the Agenda will now be considered by UN member states and organizations. Outside the UN, the Agenda has so generated little mainstream media coverage, and been received negatively, though in very different senses, by two influential voices: on May 28, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), winners of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, [issued a statement](#) criticizing the SG and the Agenda for failing "to condemn the possession of nuclear weapons" or "call on all states to join" the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), also known as the Prohibition or Ban Treaty. ICAN, which conveyed its disappointment in an Open Letter to the SG, also characterized "the agenda's recommendations for nuclear disarmament" as "stuck in the past."

On June 7, Jayantha Dhanapala, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament, commending the Agenda's "powerful arguments" for radical demilitarization, [wrote that the initiative](#) nonetheless "faces rough waters" and "seems unlikely to secure our common future with the present actors. We will either have to wait for a change of actors or search among the debris of failed negotiations for a fresh start." Speaking from obviously bitter experience, Dhanapala adds that the "common posture of the P-5" (the permanent five members of the Security Council – the US, UK, Russia, France and China) "is that as the putative global decision makers they want a SG who is more 'Secretary' than 'General.'"

For a view from inside the current UN leadership on the philosophy, politics and prospects of the new Agenda, I spoke by phone on June 14 with [Izumi Nakamitsu](#), Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs. Nakamitsu took office on 1 May 2017 – two months before the [adoption of the Ban Treaty](#) by 122 UN states – following a distinguished and varied career in the organization, most recently as assistant administrator of the Crisis Response Unit at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

What follows is an edited and condensed version of our 40-minute conversation.



Izumi Nakamitsu, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs (UN Photo/

Sean Howard (SH): I began by asking if I was right in concluding that the general thrust of the Agenda is that disarmament must be put back at the heart of the UN because it is, as Mikhail Gorbachev told the organization in 1988, “the most important thing of all.”

Izumi Nakamitsu (IZ) replied:

I don't want to say it's the most important thing of all, but actually, one of the key objectives of taking this initiative was...to put disarmament back at the...heart...of the UN's work...It really started out as one of the core mandates of the UN and over the years we've somehow sort of retreated into silos...I feel very strongly that disarmament is actually very, very linked up...[A]n objective is definitely to put it back on the centre stage, and I'm very happy to hear that you have read it in that spirit.

SH: For Gorbachev, of course, “disarmament” was something very radical – not just the regulation of, but the abolition of, war. I asked Nakamitsu if disarmament had perhaps moved away from the center of the UN because that bold, abolitionist ambition has faded over time – in the light of waves of war, waves of disillusionment about the possibilities – and if she and the Secretary-General were engaged in rediscovering the scope of the word.

IZ replied:

...I hope that both the speech itself and also the non-paper makes a very clear argument that we don't think disarmament is a Utopian dream. It is actually integrated into the very security thinking of the United Nations. I mean, the UN was created as a collective security mechanism, and the Charter is very clear on that. And what the Charter also did was to make sure the war was not...part of foreign policy, to actually clarify when the use of force is allowed and when it is not supposed to be...

Nakamitsu went further, suggesting that, as during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union “realized that disarmament is at least one of the mechanisms that they really needed to look at to make sure that the world would

not...quickly move into a major, major confrontation,” so in today’s “deteriorating” security environment – where “Cold War-like tensions” have re-emerged – “We now need...to again highlight and focus on disarmament issues, and through his initiative, the Secretary-General is really calling on Member States to reactivate their discussions and fulfill their responsibilities.”

SH: I asked how Member States were responding to the Agenda.

IZ replied:

Actually we feel that the response so far has been largely positive...[0]ne thing that is quite important is that the big countries have not criticized us, they have not complained to us, even those who were a little bit skeptical when we announced we [were] going to do this.

...I must have spoken to 70 or 80 Member States, and we had three civil-society consultations, so in the beginning it was very clear that some of the countries were really, wholeheartedly and very strongly supporting this initiative, saying ‘Yes...we have been waiting for this.’

...[A]nd other parts of the P-5 are saying...things like, ‘Well, it might be difficult to see visible progress on the nuclear part, but we really like the “Saving Lives” part, so we want to push a whole range of efforts and initiatives and potentially even put some resources towards implementation on the conventional weapons side of this.’

...[0]thers are much more comprehensively supportive. Many of them, in fact, are countries that are in the middle: you know, the Prohibition Treaty really created a division, but there are countries that are really worried about this division, and they are looking at this initiative as something they could rally behind, and then push comprehensively. So there are many supportive countries, including from NATO, in alliance with the US, as well as the

NAM [Non-Aligned Movement] countries. They organized informal discussions, they want to analyze, to understand – I mean it's a 70-, 80-page document, so many countries are still digesting – but there are already some countries saying...'Can we please translate this into all six languages?'

I have been very clear to all Member States, this is a non-paper, this is not legislatively mandated, it's entirely the Secretary-General's initiative. But some of the countries are starting to say, 'Maybe we should have this as a Working Document of the UN?'...In other words...give a little bit of status to this document.

Voting Ended			7/7/2017		10:47:53 AM	
Item 9, A/CONF.229/2017/L.3/Rev.1						
Draft treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons						
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AFGHANISTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CAMEROON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FRANCE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KUWAIT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEPAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SENEGAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TUVALU
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALBANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CANADA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GABON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KYRGYZSTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NETHERLANDS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SERBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UGANDA
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALGERIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CENTRAL AFR REP...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GAMBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LAO PDR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NEW ZEALAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SEYCHELLES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UKRAINE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANDORRA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHAD	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GEORGIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LATVIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NICARAGUA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SIERRA LEONE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED ARAB EMIR...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANGOLA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHILE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GERMANY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LEBANON	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NIGER	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SINGAPORE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED KINGDOM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ANTIGUA-BARBUDA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CHINA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GHANA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LESOTHO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NIGERIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SLOVAKIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED REP TANZA...
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARGENTINA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COLOMBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GREECE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LIBERIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NORWAY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SLOVENIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNITED STATES
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARMENIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMOROS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GRENADA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LIBYA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OMAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOLOMON ISLANDS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> URUGUAY
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AUSTRALIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CONGO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUATEMALA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LIECHTENSTEIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PAKISTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOMALIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UZBEKISTAN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AUSTRIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COSTA RICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUINEA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LITHUANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PALAU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOUTH AFRICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VANUATU
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> AZERBAIJAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COTE D'IVOIRE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUINEA-BISSAU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LUXEMBOURG	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PANAMA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOUTH SUDAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VENEZUELA
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BAHAMAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CROATIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GUYANA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MADAGASCAR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PAPUA NEW GUINEA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SPAIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> VIET NAM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BAHRAIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CUBA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HAITI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALAWI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PARAGUAY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SRI LANKA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YEMEN
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BANGLADESH	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CYPRUS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HOLY SEE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALAYSIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PERU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> STATE OF PALESTINE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ZAMBIA
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BARBADOS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CZECH REPUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HONDURAS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALDIVES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PHILIPPINES	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SUDAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ZIMBABWE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BELARUS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DEM PR OF KOREA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> HUNGARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> POLAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SURINAME	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BELGIUM	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DEM REP OF THE CO...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ICELAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MALTA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PORTUGAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SWAZILAND	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BELIZE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DENMARK	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MARSHALL ISLANDS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> QATAR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SWEDEN	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BENIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DJIBOUTI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDONESIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MAURITANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REP OF KOREA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SWITZERLAND	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BHUTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DOMINICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRAN (ISLAMIC REP...)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MAURITIUS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REP OF MOLDOVA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SYRIAN ARAB REP...	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOLIVIA (PLURINATI...)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DOMINICAN REP...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRAQ	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MEXICO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ROMANIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TAJIKISTAN	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ECUADOR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IRELAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MICRONESIA (FS)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RUSSIAN FED...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THAILAND	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOTSWANA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EGYPT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ISRAEL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONACO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RWANDA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THE FYR MACEDONIA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BRAZIL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EL SALVADOR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ITALY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONGOLIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAINT KITTS-NEVIS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TIMOR-LESTE	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BRUNEI DARUSSALAM	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EQUATORIAL GUINEA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> JAMAICA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MONTENEGRO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAINT LUCIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TOGO	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BULGARIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ERITREA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> JAPAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MOROCCO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAINT VINCENT-GRE...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TONGA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BURKINA FASO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ESTONIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> JORDAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MOZAMBIQUE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAMOA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TRINIDAD-TOBAGO	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BURUNDI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ETHIOPIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KAZAKHSTAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MYANMAR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAN MARINO	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TUNISIA	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CABO VERDE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FIJI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KENYA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NAMIBIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAO TOME-PRINCIPE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TURKEY	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> CAMBODIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FINLAND	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> KIRIBATI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NAURU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SAUDI ARABIA	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TURKMENISTAN	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN FAVOUR: 122	<input type="checkbox"/> AGAINST: 1	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ABSTENTION: 1				

UN vote on the Draft treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons. 7 July 2017. (UN Photo. Click to enlarge)

SH: I asked about the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons' (ICAN's) criticism that neither the Agenda nor the SG's speech "contained a call for countries to join the TPNW" which the organization claimed, "undermines the entire disarmament agenda."

Nakamitsu replied that openly calling on Member States to ratify the Prohibition Treaty would have put the Secretariat “in an almost impossible situation as the Secretariat for the NPT review process,” so they were “very cautious in that language, in the [SG’s] speech but also in the non-paper.”

But, she said, they “made it very clear that we consider the Treaty as a historical development, and also now clearly part of the nuclear disarmament regime.”

Furthermore, she said, “That’s basically the same message I’ve been giving to many of the countries, including the P-5: ‘Don’t worry, don’t attack it, just accept it as part of the international nuclear disarmament regime.’ And we think it is compatible.”

As for ICAN’s criticism, she said, “We all, you know, share the same objectives but we play a different role.”

SH: I suggested ICAN wanted the Agenda to make it clear there was no logical, political or legal contradiction between the NPT and the Ban Treaty and that the reason she (Nakamitsu) didn’t get any criticism from the P-5 was because she’d soft-pedaled the issue – as well as the failure of the P-5 to live up to Article VI [the NPT’s nuclear disarmament clause]. I also raised the possibility the Agenda was watered down to avoid offending the anti-Ban states.

Nakamitsu insisted quite emphatically that they did not “water down” their language. As for the relationship between the Ban Treaty and the NPT, she said:

...[W]e need to really make sure that the actual...move towards nuclear elimination will restart, and for us, pushing only on the Ban will not achieve it. And that’s the part that we really need to think about.

We also have an opportunity [within the NPT], called the 2020 review process, of using the political pressure that has been

created by the Ban Treaty. We need to use that kind of public opinion...strategically to actually have some sort of serious progress towards nuclear disarmament.

...[T]hat was the balance that we wanted to strike, so we focused on the dialogue part, and the SG personally committed to promote dialogue. We also really wanted to make sure that the principle of non-use of nuclear weapons is very strongly reaffirmed, I think that's something, given the international security environment, that is really an acute need that I see, and some other issues like risk reduction, etc. So we put the nuclear disarmament part a little more comprehensively than just focusing on the Ban Treaty."

SH: I reminded Nakamitsu that last July, the Canadian Pugwash Group adopted a recommendation that Canada sign the Treaty and work to persuade its NATO colleagues to 'denuclearize' the alliance and asked her if, as High Representative, she would welcome such a move as a meaningful contribution to efforts to achieve Global Zero?"



IZ: replied:

...[A]ny deepening of dialogue, discussions in a domestic context on these issues is welcome. You know, [one] of the very interesting and, I think, quite important developments since last July [when the Ban Treaty was adopted] is that we have started to receive a lot of parliamentary delegations coming to the UN...wanting to talk to me and ask questions about the Ban Treaty, and it is because there are domestic political debates starting to happen in many of these countries. I believe Canadian parliamentarians also came last

year.

So we welcome any deepening of substantive discussions on these issues: how do we look at defense policies? What are the measures that we need for national security in the 21st century? And where do – or [do] not – nuclear weapons stand in that national defense policy, military doctrine, etc?

We welcome questioning, and reviewing and discussion. You know, one of the reasons why [the] SG wanted to have the launch of the Agenda at a University is because he believes that [on] issues like disarmament, unless there is a broader public understanding, we're not going to be able to move.

...[A]nd therefore, young people are particularly important...[W]e welcome...noise, and voices and discussions, and I think that eventually, when these policy discussions reach a much higher level, governments will be able to make the right decisions. So I think it's a good thing; I mean we know the Pugwash [Conferences on Science and World Affairs] quite well, we've worked with them in the past and they have been very instrumental in the history of disarmament – nuclear disarmament in particular.

SH: My last question was about the way the Agenda talks – or really *doesn't* talk very much – about General and Complete Disarmament (GCD). There's only one explicit mention in the Agenda, on page 12, where GCD is referred to as “a term coined nearly a century ago.” I asked if that implied Nakamitsu thought the term General and Complete Disarmament needs replacing or has little to contribute to framing or focusing current debates?

IZ replied:

It's a very interesting question! You know...since the Ban Treaty, some of the Member States' disarmament people have started to bring back this terminology...saying this whole

thing has to be actually reviewed.

...[I]n a way, General and Complete Disarmament is about a comprehensive approach to disarmament...So we are trying to restart this policy and intellectual discussion, a comprehensive approach to disarmament that is squarely put at the centre of the international peace and security debate – and then human security also put, you know, at the centre. It's...interesting work ahead of us...



Philip Noel-Baker

SH: I said I thought the basic logic of General and Complete Disarmament holds, and reminded Nakamitsu of a quote from [the 1959 Nobel Peace Lecture](#) by the British pacifist [Philip Noel-Baker](#) who said, “It makes no sense to talk about disarmament unless you believe that war, all war, can be abolished.” I said I thought that was the basic frame for the disarmament discussion, that it needed to be recovered and that I hoped the Agenda would help do that.

IZ replied:

[I] think it's also because we have...retreated into a sort of technical discussion and a number game. I mean, frankly speaking, if the number of nuclear weapons was going down but

the quality of nuclear weapons [is] becoming much more powerful, then what is the point?

...[W]e need...a sort of mindset change in the whole approach to disarmament. And we're not going to get there immediately. You know, one of things that I think has been difficult for disarmament people, reading the non-paper, is the whole integration part. [But p]eople...who have done other things – like peacekeeping, mediation or [work with] refugees – see a very natural, clear link between disarmament and these other issues.

So we're getting there, and we want to...encourage fresh perspectives. I think when things are not happening the way we want – you know, disarmament has been stalled for many years – it's also an opportunity to bring a new perspective, fresh perspective, something different.



Sean Howard is adjunct professor of political science at Cape Breton University and member of Canadian Pugwash. He may be reached [here](#).

The *Cape Breton Spectator* is entirely reader supported,
consider [subscribing](#) today!