



Reaching Critical Will

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General Assembly

Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly is ***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.***

Why is the General Assembly important for disarmament?

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 non-proliferation by a majority vote or by consensus.

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.

What are some of the challenges facing the General Assembly?

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, non-proliferation, 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.

What can civil society do?

The First Committee is one of the best opportunities for outreach, education, and advocacy efforts on disarmament and non-proliferation issues. Discussion in the First Committee, and in the General Debate of the General Assembly, can help citizens gage their capitals' positions. They can then pressure their country for action on specific issues by:

- Writing letters to their government;
- Reaching out to their representatives in the First Committee;
- Informing local and national media about the issues and your opinons;
- Creating alternative media to spread information on the issues and their country's position; and
- Staging demonstrations in the capital or in front of their mission at the United Nations.

Stay updated with what your country does or does not say on the important disarmament and international security issues facing us today. You can see what your head of state or foreign minister says at the General Debate through our Disarmament Index. You can also stay updated with the First Committee by subscribing to the *First Committee Monitor*, a weekly publication reporting on a dozen of the most pressing, controversial issues discussed in the First Committee.

Resources

UN General Assembly

<http://www.un.org/ga/61/>

UN Office for Disarmament Affairs

<http://disarmament.un.org/>

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General Assembly Disarmament Index

<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/1com/1com07/disarminindex.html>

First Committee 2007

<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/political/1com/1comindex2.html#2007>

Governmental Contacts

<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/resources/govcontacts/govindex.html>