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Note verbale dated 8 May 1980 from the Permanent Representative
of Denmark to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-
General of the United Nations

The Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations presents his compliments to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and has the honour to submit to the second session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission a paper prepared by the Danish Government on approaches to conventional disarmament within the framework of the United Nations.

The Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations requests that this paper be circulated as an official document of the second session of the United Nations Disarmament Commission.

The Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations avails himself of this opportunity to renew to the Secretary-General of the United Nations the assurances of his highest consideration.

Annex

APPROACHES TO CONVENTIONAL DISARMAMENT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

Summary

Recognizing that nuclear weapons, whose existence puts in jeopardy the very survival of mankind, are in a class all by themselves this paper points out some of the costs and risks of the conventional arms race. It stresses the view that a realistic approach to conventional disarmament must start from recognition of the right of States to protect their security.

Previous consideration of the issue of conventional disarmament within the United Nations may be divided into three periods: the period of comprehensive plans for conventional disarmament (1948-early 1960s); the period of partial and collateral measures when conventional disarmament was largely ignored; and the period beginning with the first special session on disarmament when conventional disarmament was again taken up as a priority item in disarmament negotiations. Over the past two decades, conventional disarmament has been discussed in terms of military budgets, particularly inhumane weapons, and international arms transfers. The Final Document places this issue in a much broader perspective, relating it to the ultimate objective of general and complete disarmament and to the concept of undiminished security for all parties at each stage of the disarmament process.

In the view of the Danish Government there is an evident need for a reassessment of the general problem of conventional disarmament. The purpose should be to set in motion a process out of which a consensus on conceptions and approaches might, in time, emerge. This task should be carried out without prejudice to other efforts currently under way and on the basis of generally recognized principles, including in particular those contained in the Final Document of the first special session on disarmament. Certain basic considerations, including the need to retain a comprehensive perspective, relationship to security, and importance of the regional dimension should be taken into account. Important contributions could be expected from studies now in progress on disarmament and development, disarmament and international security, and the regional approach to disarmament.

Identification and clarification of the complex issues raised by conventional disarmament would be facilitated by the carrying out of a study under the auspices of the United Nations. The paper discusses the possible scope of such a study.

I. Introduction

In terms of the threat posed by the world-wide arms race nuclear weapons, whose existence puts in jeopardy the very survival of mankind, are in a class all by themselves. This underlines the extreme importance of effective measures of nuclear disarmament and the prevention of nuclear war. At the same time, there is also a pressing need for measures to halt the conventional arms race, although the case for such measures rests on somewhat different considerations.

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The most obvious of these is the vast cost of the conventional arms race. Military budgets are now in excess of \$400 billion annually, four fifths of which, it is generally believed, are absorbed by the conventional aspect of the arms race. This huge over-consumption of material and technical as well as human resources for destructive purposes is in stark contrast to the urgent need for social and economic development in all countries, particularly the developing countries. Moreover, the continuation of the arms race on such a scale negatively affects other spheres of international life, eroding confidence and perpetuating international tensions. Indeed, for most nations the most immediate threat to national security stems from conventional arms.

While nuclear arms have not been employed since the Second World War, the almost uninterrupted series of wars which have caused untold suffering and destruction during the same period have all been fought with conventional weapons. Casualties, direct and indirect, have been in the millions. In some cases there was a serious possibility that these conflicts might escalate into nuclear war.

In fact, the nuclear and conventional arms races are two sides of the same process, each contributing to a climate of insecurity and confrontation which fuels both.

A realistic approach to the problem of conventional disarmament must start from recognition of the right of each State to security. States seek security in military preparedness, given the absence of other means than individual or collective self-defence to attain that objective. As long as this is so, steps towards arms control and disarmament will have to be conceived in terms of balance and verification.

The rapid qualitative improvement in conventional weapons is also one of the factors promoting the dissemination of weapons of ever more destructive types throughout the world. International transfers of arms and other military goods and services appear to be of the order of magnitude of \$15-20 billion annually. This is vast by any standard. Maybe as much as one fifth of all military procurement is through international transfers, the balance being retained by the producers.

A dominant feature of the conventional arms race is its technological dynamism. Technical developments in conventional means of warfare have not stayed far behind those in the nuclear field, if at all. In fact, there is a considerable technological spin-off between these two domains.

Because of uncertainty about the performance of existing systems in actual combat - an uncertainty which might be enhanced during the coming decade as a result of the deployment of new generations of highly precise weapons - countries might tend to rely for their defence on means of retaliatory destruction rather than on matching the fighting capacity of potential adversaries. Serious imbalances of conventional forces, real or perceived, could increase the likelihood of nuclear proliferation or of more extensive reliance on nuclear weapons. This once again underlines the inseparability of efforts to stem the nuclear and the conventional arms race.

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II. Previous consideration of the problem within the United Nations

Within the United Nations approaches to conventional disarmament have differed considerably over the years, reflecting changes in underlying conceptions. Three periods may be distinguished. First, there was a period - from 1948 to the early 1960s - when conventional disarmament was conceived in terms of comprehensive plans for the limitation of armaments and armed forces and, after 1959, for general and complete disarmament. During the second period, beginning in the early 1960s, attention centred on partial and collateral measures and the question of conventional weapons was largely ignored. A third period may be dated from the tenth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament, when measures relating to conventional weapons and reductions of armed forces were again brought back into focus as priority items in international disarmament negotiations.

Over the past two decades only three types of measures have been considered which have any bearing on the question of conventional forces and armaments. These are proposals for limitations of, or cuts in, military budgets, proposals to prohibit the use of weapons of a particularly injurious or inhumane character, and proposals relating to international arms transfers.

Mutual reductions of military budgets were proposed already in the mid-1950s by the Soviet Union and have been considered intermittently ever since. From the point of view of limitation of conventional weapons, the attraction of this kind of approach is that it deals directly with the central problems: sizeable budgetary cuts would relieve the economic burden of armaments and would effectively curb the conventional arms race, both in its quantitative and in its qualitative aspects. The difficulties are equally great and were recognized from the outset. They are the lack of comparability of military budgets, the lack of sufficient information in some cases, and the difficulty of effective verification. A series of studies by the United Nations have highlighted these problems. At the same time they have led to efforts to devise, test and improve instruments for reporting and measurement of military budgets. If reporting on this basis were widely adopted this could increase confidence by contributing to openness and transparency regarding military preparations and capabilities. This would constitute the necessary first step towards progress in the field of agreed and balanced budget reductions.

The second line of action pursued during this period was to adapt and expand the humanitarian law of war by prohibitions, or restrictions on use, of certain conventional weapons deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects. Prohibitions of this type were included in the Hague Conventions at the turn of the century and in the Geneva Protocol of 1925 and are still in force, but subsequent progress has been slow, and utterly inadequate in view of the rapid development of modern warfare.

Efforts related to the international transfer of arms have concentrated on three approaches: public registration of arms transfers, restraints on the part of suppliers and restraints on the part of recipients on a regional basis.

Draft resolutions relating to registration of arms transfers with the United Nations were introduced by Malta in 1965 and by Denmark in 1968. The first was defeated in the General Assembly by a narrow margin. The second, which called for the Secretary-General to ascertain the views of Governments on such registration, was withdrawn without having been put to a vote.

There have been many calls over the years for restraint to be shown by suppliers of arms. Bilateral consultations initiated in 1977 between the United States and the Soviet Union could constitute an important point of departure in this respect.

Proposals to deal with the question of arms transfers through restraint on the part of recipients, acting on a regional basis, were first put forward in 1966 by the United States in the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament. It was stressed that the initiative for the agreement must come from within the region, that the agreement must be such as to contribute to regional security, and that potential suppliers must undertake to respect the agreement. Similar conceptions underlie the efforts of a number of Latin American countries reflected in the 1974 Declaration of Ayacucho and subsequent initiatives.

The tenth special session represented a turning point in the approach of the United Nations to conventional disarmament. It did so first of all by reinstating this aspect of the arms race among the priority items of international disarmament negotiations. Furthermore, while the Final Document lists efforts inherited from the previous period and recommends that they be resolutely pursued, it places the question of conventional disarmament in a much broader perspective, linking it once again to the ultimate objective of general and complete disarmament and specifying the general principles and perspectives which should guide negotiations on reduction of armed forces and of conventional armaments. Here the overarching concept is that of undiminished security for all parties at each stage of the disarmament process. Reference is made in particular to paragraphs 81 to 90 of the Final Document.

III. Possible future approaches

Thus the tenth special session outlined a new and constructive approach to conventional disarmament and determined, in the very broadest terms, the contours of such an approach. Much remains to be done, however, to translate the aims and ambitions contained in the Final Document into practical terms.

In the field of conventional disarmament the distance is particularly great between the broad principles and perspectives of the Final Document and the elaboration of specific acceptable measures, conforming to these principles and effectively able to contribute towards halting and reversing the arms race in its conventional aspect. With regard to nuclear weapons, there is already a large measure of agreement on the aims to be pursued, on the approaches to be adopted, and on the ways in which different and parallel efforts, bilateral, multilateral and regional, can and should be combined to control the arms race both in its vertical and horizontal aspects. In the case of conventional armaments no general consensus has emerged, whether on the character and scope of the problem, or, a fortiori, on approaches and priorities.

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A central task at present is therefore to consider in depth the whole area of conventional disarmament in order to elaborate, on the basis of the conclusions of the special session and of other generally accepted principles, the elements of balanced and mutually acceptable approaches. It goes without saying that this work of reassessment should be pursued without prejudice to efforts, whether multilateral, regional or bilateral, already in progress in the field of conventional disarmament. It should also be pursued in a way which does not detract from efforts in parallel fields, including in particular the field of nuclear disarmament. On the contrary, the close relationship between conventional and nuclear disarmament and the need for parallel and co-ordinated progress in both areas should be fully recognized.

As a deliberative body of the General Assembly, universal in composition, the Disarmament Commission is obviously an appropriate forum for this task. Without trying to prejudge the outcome of the deliberations of the Commission at its present session, it may be useful to draw attention to certain considerations which, taken together, seem to constitute the necessary basis for future efforts.

The first of these basic considerations is the central theme emerging from the Final Document of the special session, namely, that the reduction of armed forces and conventional armaments should be approached within a comprehensive perspective. This has several implications. First, specific measures should be conceived in terms of the over-all process leading towards the goal of general and complete disarmament. Secondly, in that process the interrelationship between nuclear and conventional disarmament should be constantly borne in mind. While negotiations can be conducted concurrently on these priority items, efforts in those two areas cannot be conceived in isolation from each other. Thirdly, the process in question is a global process in which all States have a duty to contribute, a right to participate, and, in negotiations which have a direct bearing on their own security, a right to do so on an equal footing. In this process, States with the largest military arsenals have a special responsibility.

Secondly, considerations of national security policy assume a particular importance and take on a specific character in relation to conventional disarmament. In the Final Document of the special session this is expressed in very general terms in the requirement of undiminished security. Limitations on conventional arms and armed forces have an impact on the immediate security situations and security perceptions of countries which is more direct and more complex than is the case with most other measures which could be envisaged. Moreover, fundamental asymmetries, not themselves military in nature, often assume great importance in assessing the security implications of specific measures of conventional disarmament. Measures might in many cases have to be designed to take these asymmetries into account, rather than applying general concepts to widely differing situations. The extreme complexity of conventional disarmament derives from these facts.

For the vast majority of States their security situation is determined primarily - although by no means exclusively - by relationships with neighbouring countries and by the regional security context. The third point to be stressed is therefore that effective measures of conventional disarmament must to a large extent be regional in character, reflecting the particular needs and problems of each region, but also taking advantage of specific regional aspirations and opportunities.

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One of the important trends of the last decade has been the globalization of the arms race, its expansion into areas which had not hitherto been affected, or had not been affected to the same extent. The most promising approach to this problem seems to be regional arms limitation arrangements, adopted at the initiative of States of the region and designed to provide undiminished security at a lower military level. In this perspective, the question of limitations on the flow of arms to, from, and within regions is an important aspect of the broader issue of agreed limitations on acquisition or possession of arms of specific types or quantities.

In short, conventional disarmament should be conceived in a comprehensive perspective while being to a large extent negotiated and implemented in a regional context. It would seem that these two aspects in combination provide a proper framework in which to pursue conventional disarmament.

To emphasize the importance of the regional dimension of conventional disarmament in no way amounts to advocating a parcelling out of the over-all disarmament effort into a series of mutually unrelated regional processes. Many States relate to several strategic sectors, and their security situations are correspondingly complex. Moreover, if conventional disarmament measures are to contribute to an over-all long-term process leading towards general and complete disarmament, regional arrangements must be designed to respect the principle of undiminished security for all, including States beyond the region itself. On the other hand, the commitment of all States to the goal of general and complete disarmament implies an obligation for outside States to support and respect such regional arrangements. Finally, the necessity of co-ordination of progress in regional disarmament with significant progress in arms limitation among the leading military Powers implies that regional disarmament efforts should not, and in fact cannot, be divorced from efforts at the global level.

Three studies currently being conducted under the auspices of the United Nations may be expected to provide insights, perspectives, and conclusions which should be highly relevant to a reassessment of the issues raised by conventional disarmament. These are the studies dealing with the interrelationship between disarmament and development, the interrelationship between disarmament and international security, and the regional approach to disarmament.

Of these studies, the two last-mentioned are scheduled to be submitted to the General Assembly at its thirty-fifth session this autumn. None of these studies is specifically concerned with conventional disarmament, and given the scope and difficulty of the subjects with which they deal, it is possible that none of them will focus on that particular question. Nevertheless, the problems addressed by these studies are among the core factors which have to be evaluated in connexion with conventional disarmament.

While the Disarmament Commission is a natural forum for consideration of these matters, there is in the view of the Danish delegation a need to provide the Commission with a more substantive basis for its deliberations.

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With this in mind, Denmark has for some time argued that identification and clarification of the complex issues raised by conventional disarmament would be facilitated by the carrying out of a study, under the auspices of the United Nations, of the impact of all aspects of conventional armaments, on the arms race in general, as well as on international peace and stability.

Such studies by groups of qualified experts, appointed by the Secretary-General on a balanced geographical basis, have proved useful in other cases. The combination of a high level of expertise and geographical and political representativity with opportunities for thorough and relatively informal exchanges, together with the tradition of unanimity in reporting which has been established, makes such groups particularly suited for the study of complex and sensitive questions and for seeking out areas where, in time, differing perceptions might converge.

Consideration might also be given to the possibility of drawing on the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research which is now being set up in Geneva.

A study dealing with the conventional aspect of the arms race might seek to ascertain the facts of the conventional arms race in its quantitative and qualitative aspects as well as in its vertical and horizontal dimensions, including international arms transfers; it might examine its interrelationship with international peace and security as well as with social and economic development; and it might examine the nature of the particular problems involved in conventional disarmament, including an analysis of the connexion between conventional and nuclear disarmament; finally, it might examine the general principles and guidelines which relate to conventional disarmament and explore directions in which it might be possible to proceed and modalities to be applied.
