DISARMAMENT COMMISSION

REVIEW OF THE DECLARATION OF THE 1980s AS THE SECOND
DISARMAMENT DECADE

Addendum

REPLIES RECEIVED FROM GOVERNMENTS

AUSTRALIA

[6 May 1985]

The overall lack of progress in disarmament and arms control in the first half of the Second Disarmament Decade is of considerable concern to the Australian Government. Of particular concern is the fact that despite the establishment of new machinery following the first special session of the United Nations General Assembly devoted to disarmament (SSOD I), there has been little progress in the field of multilateral disarmament. The establishment of the Committee on Disarmament (later renamed the Conference on Disarmament (CD)), the revitalization of the United Nations Disarmament Commission and the setting up of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) all augured well for the Decade but have brought meagre dividends.

Nevertheless the Australian Government continues to set great store by the multilateral disarmament process, for a number of reasons.

First, it is important to note that since the first of the multilateral disarmament forums were established in 1945 and 1946 the active involvement of the international community in such bodies has considerably increased. While such an expansion in the number of countries involved may complicate the negotiating process this none the less reflects the growth of new centres of power, influence and concern in the world outside the permanent membership of the original
multilateral disarmament bodies. It also reflects the expansion in the United Nations membership and the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement. In particular, it reflects the growing perception that disarmament and arms control are not just the preserve of the nuclear-weapon States in an age when nuclear war can threaten the existence of life itself.

Second, while the overall record of the Conference on Disarmament and its predecessor bodies has been patchy, they have, on occasions, contributed to major landmark arms control agreements. Prominent among these is the nuclear non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Although the first drafts of this treaty were prepared by the United States and the Soviet Union, the 18-Nation Disarmament Committee introduced major additional elements which were included in the NPT. That Treaty now has almost 130 adherents and is widely regarded by the international community as a benchmark of responsible international behaviour.

The 18-Nation Disarmament Committee also had a role in negotiating the 1963 partial test-ban Treaty which restricts nuclear tests to underground.

The sea-bed Treaty, which prohibits the emplacement of weapons of mass destruction on the deep sea-bed, although again based on a United States/Soviet draft, was negotiated in the Conference of the Committee on Disarmament, another predecessor body, from 1969 to 1970. So too was the biological weapons Convention of 1972, and the environmental modification Convention of 1977.

With each successive agreement submitted by the two super-Powers to multilateral negotiation, the impact and influence on the negotiations of medium and small Powers have grown.

This had led to the growth of an experienced body of negotiators from all groups of countries, a standing disarmament agenda and a permanent impetus for multilateral negotiations. Multilateral disarmament activity is here to stay and the old days of the complete super-Power dominance of the process are gone.

At the same time the disarmament and arms control process cannot be divorced from the general international situation. The advent of the Conference on Disarmament, in the form we know it today, regrettably coincided with a period of deterioration in relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and multilateral disarmament suffered accordingly.

Since 1978 no new arms control treaty has been concluded. Only the negotiations on a chemical weapons convention and a radiological weapons convention have been carried forward, not least through the efforts of middle-ranking countries. The projected chemical weapons convention, many aspects of which are already agreed in the CD, will directly apply to the international community as a whole. It is a prime example of an agreement which only the CD can produce. But even these negotiations can only be ultimately concluded with the co-operation of the two major Powers. The United States in 1984 indicated its willingness to pursue the goal of a chemical weapons convention in a multilateral context by tabling a draft Treaty in the Conference on Disarmament. The Soviet Union has a similar willingness but has not yet responded with its own proposals. We hope it will do so soon.

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Despite the evolution of the multilateral disarmament process the influence and attitudes of the United States and the Soviet Union remain crucially important. In this respect 1985 gives us some cause for hope that there will be some movement in the multilateral disarmament process. The United States and the Soviet Union have begun negotiations on the three key areas of outer space, strategic nuclear arms and intermediate-range nuclear arms. The Australian Government has whole-heartedly welcomed the resumption of these bilateral negotiations and hopes that they will provide a new atmosphere and encouraging impetus for the Conference on Disarmament’s own negotiations.

The Australian Government has made its views known on this issue both to the Soviet Union and the United States. It is partly for this reason that Australia has arranged its own bilateral talks on disarmament with the Soviet Union, which took place in Canberra from 20 to 22 March and with the United States from 1 to 2 May 1985.

The Australian Government wants to see a rejuvenation of the multilateral disarmament process. The patience of middle and small countries, including Australia, is not inexhaustible. Many members of the Conference on Disarmament have become increasingly outspoken about the lack of progress in the Conference. Australia shares that concern. It believes that all members of the CD must accept their responsibilities to tackle the substantive problems which have to be resolved before negotiations can be successfully concluded, and eschew political, polemical and procedural manoeuvres. Australia has attempted to adopt a moderating role with a view to getting across the idea that the multilateral negotiating process requires creativity, compromise, and the acceptance of other States' rights to their views. The key to success is to negotiate agreements that may not be entirely satisfactory to all but which all can accept. Australia will be continuing its efforts in this regard to ensure that the second half of the Second Disarmament Decade is more successful than the first.