

The ratchet effect

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Disarmament, therefore, is always difficult, slow and protracted and disarmament negotiators are put at an impossible disadvantage. While armers (North Atlantic Treaty Organization or Warsaw Pact) go two steps forward, disarmers can at best only go one step back. This "ratchet effect" — the relative ease of going in one direction and difficulty or impossibility of going in reverse — is the central problem faced at this special session. It is, of course, not new. It has been the central problem at every disarmament conference throughout history. The ratchet effect of the first kind is the heart of every arms race.

SALT trouble

But while genuine disarmers at the special session were experiencing difficulty in going downward, genuine disarmers at the SALT talks were also having trouble — owing to the ratchet effect of the second kind, a phenomenon brought to my attention by Jane M.O. Sharp

in an article in *Humanity Calls* (June 1978). According to Sharp, it is much easier for both parties in these bilateral talks to level off by bringing the inferior force levels *up* than it is to bring the superior force levels *down*. Once again, this reaction is rooted in military history.

So what hope is there if nations cannot easily go in reverse? This seemingly impossible task may be easier than we think because the rules of war have changed. For nuclear powers, the ratchet has in fact been removed, but few leaders recognize this fact. The old idea of a balance of power no longer applies to two nations when both are armed with nuclear weapons. For them balance of power is an obsolete notion. "Everything," Albert Einstein said of the nuclear age, "has changed but our way of thinking."

Whether the military balance is exact or not makes no difference when both sides have second-strike capability and the enormous "over-kill" capability that that implies. Let me give a hypothetical example. Assume that one of the nuclear powers, in good faith, makes five consecutive reductions in its nuclear

capability of 10 per cent each year while the other power consistently cheats. Would the resultant 71 per cent disparity in tactical "nukes", or 71 per cent disparity in the number of strategic silos, make any real difference to deterrence? Or in the subsequent ability to fight a nuclear war? Yet the above case is an extreme example — five years of unilateral disarmament and zero verification.

Balance-of-power theory, however, still has validity for nations that can only defend themselves with conventional arms and therefore must be prepared to fight a conventional war. For these countries the ratchet effect still applies — and disarmament may be an illusory goal. It is the two superpowers, therefore, that need to be challenged on the whole idea of balance of power. It is they that must take the big, decisive and unilateral steps to start the disarmament process. But if, by a determined effort of will, such leadership is shown, it is my firm belief, as a result of observing the special session, that the other nations will not lag far behind.

Swords and plowshares

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proposals on organizational means to promote more effective multilateral disarmament deliberations and negotiations. Other diplomats, observers and interested members of the public concentrated their attention on the part that dealt with immediate, short-term measures for halting and reversing the arms race. This section included suggestions for methods of nuclear disarmament — comprehensive test-ban, strategic-arms limitation, pledges on non-use of nuclear weapons, creation of nuclear-weapon-free zones and zones of peace, strengthening of non-proliferation regimes — as well as methods for limitations on other weapons of mass destruction and conventional weapons. In short, the document contained an impressive roster of issues for discussion, but most of it was entangled in a maze of square brackets (to denote areas of disagreement and alternative formulations).

During the first five weeks of the six-week session, the document grew in length, complexity and number of brackets. Delegates began to despair of achieving an agreement on any meaningful statement of long-range disarmament goals, short-term arms-limitation measures, or organizational arrangements for future multilateral negotiations. Then, in the final week, a combination of deadline-induced, almost round-the-clock discussions and skilfully-applied pressure by respected, experienced individuals succeeded in producing a clear text that incorporated all the issues outlined above. Although the final text — with its vague wording, awkward syntax and repetitious phrasing — gave much evidence of the effect of deadline pressures and the difficulty in reaching consensus on many items, its adoption was accompanied by a mixture of relief, self-congratulatory surprise and even euphoria. The two potential disasters — of failing to achieve a consensus on *any* final document and of producing a document in

which the lack of consensus on *all* substantive matters was patent — had been averted.

In addition, and more positively, there was the general feeling that the special session had several modest accomplishments to its credit: a list of issues was compiled as a guide to future arms-control and disarmament deliberations; two nuclear powers — France and the People's Republic of China — that had shunned participation in previous deliberations on nuclear-arms control took an active role in the proceedings; an improved multilateral negotiating structure was created; the merit of the UN organizational system as a forum for broadly-multilateral discussions of major world issues was vindicated; and, of those people who had access to the news media that covered the session, some gave at least fleeting thought to the peace and security problems of the contemporary world.

On reflection, there is one other result that, while it appears to be equally modest at first glance, could, in the long run, be the special