

UNSSOD'S UNDOING

One of the few positive outcomes of the Third UN Special Session on Disarmament is that it did not call for a fourth. It's time to re-think the UN's role in disarmament.

BY BRADLEY FEASEY

MEETING IN THE SHADOW of the Moscow summit, the Third Special Session of the United Nations devoted to Disarmament (UNSSOD III) should have been able to tap into recent positive developments in Soviet-American relations and express a new multilateral consensus on priorities and principles in arms control and disarmament – or so one might have thought. Instead, UNSSOD III met for four weeks (31 May to 25 June) only to emerge with no agreed consensus document or even a concluding statement; a lesser achievement even than the Second Special Session on Disarmament in 1982. How could the conference have failed so completely? Are there lessons to be learned? To understand the failure of UNSSOD III, it is important to step back for a moment for a brief look at its predecessors, UNSSOD I and II.

THE IDEA OF A SPECIAL UN SESSION devoted to disarmament predated the first UNSSOD by some twenty years. A resolution urging the consideration of such a session was passed by the General Assembly in 1957 but a resolution calling for such a session did not attract consensus until 1976. UNSSOD I was an assertion of the importance of multilateral approaches to arms control and disarmament, at a time when bilateral US-Soviet efforts were faltering, and detente was becoming more tenuous.

UNSSOD I began with a draft final document in hand (containing many sections still not agreed upon) that had been produced earlier by the Preparatory Com-

mittee of the session. Meeting for six weeks in 1978, the Special Session overcame disagreements in the draft language and adopted the Final Document of the Special Session. Consisting of one hundred and twenty-nine paragraphs, the clear emphasis of the document was on the threat posed to mankind by the existence of nuclear weapons and the need to take measures to secure general and complete disarmament. It also asserted that the UN “has a central role and primary responsibility in the sphere of disarmament.” This statement would, in different ways, have a hollow ring ten years later at UNSSOD III.

The Final Document called for the convening of a Second Special Session on Disarmament. The General Assembly later set 1982 as the date, putting the Second Special Session on a collision course with the breakdown in East-West relations which occurred in the early 1980s.

UNSSOD II was marked by public expressions of support for disarmament the likes of which had never before been seen in North America; almost one million people marched for disarmament through the streets of New York in June 1982. This was in contrast to the paralysis and recriminatory tone which gripped the Session itself. There was no agreement on an assessment of UNSSOD I and no agreement on a comprehensive programme of disarmament. On matters of substance, multilateral disarmament was frozen in its tracks.

The Second Special Session was, however, able to patch together what became known as its

“Concluding Document.” It essentially acknowledged the failure of the session, taking time to note that there was agreement on the launching of the World Disarmament Campaign and the UN programme of fellowships on disarmament. The document also called for a Third Special Session on Disarmament.

SETTING THE AGENDA FOR UNSSOD III proved to be a contentious matter. After three meetings of the Preparatory Committee, what emerged was described as a “conceptual statement” which would guide the work of the Special Session. Its substantive agenda items called for: an assessment of the implementation of the recommendations of the previous two UNSSODs, a forward assessment of developments and trends relevant to disarmament, and the role of the UN in disarmament and its disarmament machinery and public education activities. Unlike previous preparatory committees, the UNSSOD III Committee was unable to provide any draft language for consideration of the Special Session.

The Special Session began with two weeks of plenary; the time during which heads of state, government, foreign ministers and the like address the General Assembly. For some of the smaller member states, it would be their only appearance at the UNSSOD; not all can afford to tie up personnel in New York for four weeks to discuss disarmament. Since no draft language emerged from the Preparatory Committee, the plenary addresses were watched carefully for clues as to how the session might un-

fold. Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar's address set a positive and pragmatic tone for the session, calling for imagination and realism in disarmament approaches, and pointing out the need to address all aspects of disarmament, including conventional disarmament and local conflicts. References to “confidence-building measures,” “verification” and “positive change in international relations” crept into many of the plenary addresses. Developments such as these, and the clear blunting of the rhetoric which dominated the Second Special Session, created a cautious sense of optimism by the time plenary addresses ended.

The days of 8 and 9 June were set aside to let various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from around the world address the Committee of the Whole. While hundreds of NGOs came to New York for the UNSSOD, there existed a curious gulf between official delegations to the Special Session and NGOs. For the most part, the public gallery in the General Assembly was empty during plenary, meaning delegates addressed delegates. In turn, very few delegations took the time to send members to the NGO speeches at the Committee of the Whole – the NGOs addressed each other. The stated purpose of measures to accommodate the NGOs at each UNSSOD is “to allow for some direct input by those organizations in the special sessions.” This is not likely to happen, however, until both sides see the value in talking to each other, and not just to themselves.

The Committee of the Whole