

Despite these divisions, which have beset the multilateral ACD agenda for some years, the atmosphere at UNSSOD III was generally positive and, unlike UNSSOD II, largely free from vituperative and unproductive rhetoric. The major reason for the improved climate was the recent progress in the USA/Soviet bilateral ACD negotiations, highlighted by the ratification of the INF Treaty at the Moscow Summit, which coincided fortuitously with the commencement of the Special Session. Delegation statements in the opening Plenary tended to demonstrate: (a) an increasing recognition among the Non-Aligned of their responsibility in the ACD process, particularly in relation to conventional arms (some 20 million deaths have occurred as a result of conventional armed conflict in the past 40 years, mainly in the developing world), and (b) a general avoidance of unhelpful ideological rhetoric.

In view of these encouraging trends, why did UNSSOD III end in failure? There are several reasons. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that the fundamental differences of approach to ACD noted above remained so entrenched as to preclude a meaningful consensus on key ACD issues, despite the improved atmosphere. Such differences have long been apparent in UNGA First Committee voting and within the Conference on Disarmament (CD).

In addition, there seemed to be little sense of purpose to or urgency at UNSSOD III. Despite the active presence of many articulate NGO representatives, there was little discernible public pressure, as reflected by the lack of media interest. Even when the clock was evidently running out, many delegations preferred to reiterate national positions rather than focusing on overcoming substantive differences. Despite last-minute efforts, the strength of purpose required to forge consensus simply failed to materialize. The procedural decision to rely on prolonged informal consultations among a select few countries as the primary means of seeking consensus may also have been unwise.

The outcome of UNSSOD III suggests, furthermore, that the international community had not had sufficient time to "digest the remarkable transformation" in the superpower relationship, as recently suggested by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs. He further noted there was also "insufficient appreciation of the dynamic relationship between bilateral disarmament negotiations and multilateral endeavours."