

Dividing Lines

UN security policy could well be characterized as an ongoing struggle between what is desirable and what is feasible. The aspirations that led many into policy and diplomacy careers eventually run headlong into sometimes challenging political realities – foremost of which is that states (like NGOs) embrace disparate and sometimes even contradictory outcome priorities from negotiations such as those taking place at the BMS.

Indonesia's statement on the first day of the BMS (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement) reflects what might serve as an example of such priorities – simultaneously affirming the “sovereign right of states to acquire, manufacture, export and retain conventional weapons” with a call for states (especially developed ones) to embrace the principle of “undiminished security at the lowest level of armaments.” The statement also calls for “intensified actions at the regional and international levels to promote dialogue and a culture of peace...”

The Indonesian intervention blends the protection of a core state interest, an important security principle (albeit one directed in this instance at states not affiliated with the NAM) and a lofty but somewhat undefined aspiration. While an increasingly important voice in security discussions at the UN, Indonesia is clearly not alone during this BMS in defining its security interests in ways that protect state prerogatives and advance cherished policy objectives while keeping the door open for more comprehensive if less easily definable responses to violence.

It has often been the NGO community that has sought to insert language of urgency and aspiration into UN proceedings. In the security field, our task, it seems, is to remind states that there are more effective ways to address their legitimate security needs and fulfill the lofty ideals of the UN charter than resorting to the use of weapons that waste resources, endanger children and other civilians, and create cycles of violent response.

This week, however, inspiration for action has been coming from many quarters. While the BMS is taking place, discussions have ensued in the Security Council on the SG's report on Children and Armed Conflict. Other discussions focused on the MDGs and on Trafficking have provided evidence of the role that small arms play in criminal activity, child abuse and impeded development.

Within the BMS itself, we listened intently to reactions to a discussion paper prepared by Mr. Lawrence Olufemi Obisakin from the Nigerian Mission, one of the Friends of the Chair at this BMS. Mr. Obisakin's paper made the case for promotion of a ‘culture of peace’ as a supplement to ongoing negotiations focused on borders, technical assistance, arms tracing and Ambassador Macedo's initiatives to strengthen follow-up mechanisms.

Some of those reactions recalled discussions that NGOs might have – speakers reminding each other that the promotion of security has many levels of responsibility and that well educated, well fed societies are less likely to be awash in illicit arms. Other delegations expressed concern that some of the ‘aspirational’ language employed in the paper could

not feasibly find a policy connection within the context of this BMS and might actually distract delegates from negotiating tasks on which some agreements are possible.

Some of those watching the BMS proceedings and interacting with delegates feel some deep resonance with 'culture of peace' language and the practical commitments that flow from it. There is also a feeling that more direct interaction by diplomats with the many high level discussions taking place around headquarters on issues relevant to illicit small arms would yield valuable perspectives and perhaps even a refreshed sense of purpose.

However, delegation after delegation has made it clear that illicit small arms and light weapons remain a scourge on our societies and a major drain on our capacity to ensure public safety, respect for human rights, and economic sufficiency. As BMS delegates and UN officials valiantly overcome fatigue from long weeks of briefings and negotiations (and sneak a peak at the latest football scores), their continued focus on prospects for tangible progress towards more robust efforts to curb illicit arms is highly desired. There are certain matters that the UN is particularly well-placed to take up, and negotiating concrete steps to end the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons is one of those. In this instance, the desirable and the feasible seem closely connected.