THE CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT:
ITS GLORIOUS HISTORY, NON-EXISTENT PRESENT
AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Toma Galli*

I. Introduction

The first Resolution of the UN General Assembly, passed at its initial meeting in January 1946 and subsequently confirmed on several occasions by the same body, dealt minutely with the most prominent subject of that time, but also a no less important subject of our time—the omnipresent issue of weapons of mass destruction. The resolution was the direct consequence of the US nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which absolutely shocked the then already considerably transformed world and opened a new era in relations between the world's superpowers. Simultaneously, the general debate on disarmament and arms control that was being prepared within the UN after the end of the Second World War was re-directed to an entirely new focus: weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons. In the future, it would be nuclear weapons, due to their unmatched destructive potential, that would remain the focus of all serious debates on disarmament and arms control right up until the present.

The use of nuclear weapons completely changed the established geo-strategic relations between states and opened an entirely new chapter in international relations. From the very beginning, once the destructive power of nuclear weapons had become known, it was evident that the strong desire of individual states to master the technology of producing them would surpass the possibility of having these weapons eliminated from the arsenal of the world's powers through a multilateral treaty. This was clear confirmation of the general rule that states, given the chance, would attempt to realise their superiority over other states by all available means. In addition, the subsequent course of events clearly showed that only by meeting vital state interests could the relations between states be substantially developed, irrespective of the form these interests might assume. In many respects, in the field of disarmament and arms control, these relations had taken their most obvious and clearly recognisable form.


Although with the end of the Cold War a bipolar geo-strategic system has been replaced by the absolute supremacy of the USA, the basic characteristics of Cold War relations have remained unchanged. Deep mistrust and tension are still the main features of the relations between the key states of the world, although today there are more than two central players. The latest data on the amounts allocated by the world’s most powerful states in their national budgets for armaments fully support this conclusion. In this paper, we have tried to describe the efforts that have been undertaken by states to regulate, within the UN or with its mediation, the most important issues directly related to their own national security. These efforts have gone through different stages, mainly depending on the international climate of the day. Individual periods, marked by détente between the two superpowers and also by a change in the approach of the international community to the issues of disarmament and arms control (from attempts at an integral agreement on universal and global disarmament to a series of treaties aimed at gradual development in this area), have led to a number of treaties in an attempt to additionally reinforce what has been achieved in mutual relations. It was these efforts that eventually led to the establishment of the Conference on Disarmament, one of the most important institutions in the area of disarmament and arms control, the main subject of our paper, and, as regularly emphasised by prominent diplomats responsible for disarmament, the only multilateral forum dedicated to negotiations on the issues of disarmament and arms control.¹

II. Historical Background—
How the Conference on Disarmament Came into Being and How It Worked

1. A Brief History of Organised Efforts Aimed at Regulating the Issues of Disarmament and Arms Control—Predecessors of the Conference on Disarmament

a. The UN Disarmament Commission

Although it was formed long before the Conference on Disarmament and formally not its direct predecessor, at the beginning of this review it seems necessary to mention the establishment and work of the UN Disarmament

¹ See the Final Document of the First Special Meeting of the General Assembly on Disarmament, S-10/2 of 30 June 1978 (http://www.un.org/disarmament/).