Human Rights and Disarmament –
A Blind Date or a Shotgun Marriage?

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‘Wit is the sudden marriage of ideas which before their union were not perceived to have any relation.’

Mark Twain

I. Introduction

Efforts towards the realization of human rights and those for facilitating disarmament share many common traits. Both are undertaken in the interest of humankind and are intrinsically connected to the United Nations’ noble promise of ‘saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war’.¹ Both are often perceived as being mostly aspirational and inspired by an idealistic sense of romanticism about their ability to yield concrete results in safeguarding that good prevails over evil. Furthermore, both face similar challenges. Each of them requires a tremendous and constantly tested level of political commitment that few governments are able to muster in times of international

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or domestic crisis. In that sense, they share the inherent constraint that the realization of their objectives remains a constant uphill struggle that often faces the might of heavyweight arguments in the discourse of domestic and international relations, such as national security interests and persistent external or internal threats. In facing such threats, it is often demanded that robust engagement would be required, relegating disarmament and human rights to the category of metaphysical aspirations; and that giving them primary consideration would, if anything, carry the danger of exacerbating the threat by emphasizing limitations in situations where inhibited responses are called for. Similarly, the full implementation of the promises made under the notions of human rights or disarmament would require resources that governments are rarely inclined to provide on a constant basis. On the contrary, disarmament and human rights are the first to experience the brunt of economic downturns, while defense budgets often continue to thrive. They share another fundamental characteristic, namely that everyone likes them in a superficial sort of way, but when it comes to getting serious about putting them into practice, they are quickly left alone.

Yet, despite their shared purpose and all their commonalities, it appears as if they are the obvious ‘match’ which has never met. The palpable matchmaker, the UN, has contributed its bit to keeping them apart by nurturing their evolution along different institutional paths. And it all could have been such a romantic affair with the UN Charter embracing the notions of disarmament and human rights in similar fashion. It tasked the General Assembly to consider and make recommendations on the ‘principles governing disarmament and the regulations of armaments’, based on which the UN has developed a multilayer institutional infrastructure to address disarmament issues, ranging from the General Assembly’s First Committee (entitled ‘Disarmament and International Security Committee’), the UN Disarmament Commission founded in 1952, and the Conference on Disarmament established subsequent to the first special session of the UN General Assembly dedicated

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2 Art. 11, para. 1, UN Charter, supra note 1.