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The paramount concern of the United Nations has always been the maintenance of peace which at the best of times is difficult; and a world awash with arms has made such a task infinitely harder. If the production and trade in arms can be drastically reduced so that potential and actual antagonists experience serious difficulty in obtaining arms this will make peacekeeping an easier proposition for the United Nations. During the 1990s, and despite attempted embargoes, few combatants ever experienced serious problems in obtaining the arms they required. The United Nations Charter is specific in the responsibilities it assigns to both the General Assembly and the Security Council in the matter of disarmament. The General Assembly has the duty to consider ‘principles governing disarmament and the regulation of armaments’ and can make recommendations to UN members or the Security Council. The Security Council is responsible for formulating ‘plans to be submitted to the members of the United Nations for the establishment of a system for the regulation of armaments’. Over the years of the Cold War, UN efforts to limit armaments or encourage disarmament were constantly thwarted by the massive scale of military preparedness that both sides in that confrontation saw fit to maintain. Even so, various steps were taken by the United Nations during its first 40 years, though these did not bring an end to the arms race.

Between 1959 and 1985 the United Nations promoted a series of treaties designed principally to restrict the spread of nuclear weapons and to limit nuclear testing and these form the basis of an international arms control system. They include: the Antarctic Treaty of 1959 which provides for the demilitarization of Antarctica and prohibits any military activities in the region; the 1963 Partial Test-Ban Treaty which banned nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, outer space and under water; and a 1967 Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space which banned the placing of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction in orbit. Also, in 1967, the Treaty of Tlatelolco created the world’s first nuclear-weapon-free zone to cover Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1968 came the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons which aimed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and to promote the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The 1970s saw another four treaties of relative significance: the 1971 Sea-Bed Treaty which banned the
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placement of nuclear or other weapons on the seabed; the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention which prohibited the development and production of bacteriological weapons; the 1977 Convention which prohibited the use of Environmental Modification Techniques (the ENMOD Convention); and the 1979 Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies which complemented the 1967 space treaty. In 1981 the Inhumane Weapons Convention prohibited the use of conventional weapons deemed to be excessively injurious or to have indiscriminate effects. In 1985 a second nuclear-free zone was created by the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (the Treaty of Rarotonga). None of these treaties curtailed the arms race between the United States and the USSR and their respective allies; nor did they have any impact upon the growth of the international arms trade.

The explosion of the first atomic bomb at Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 ushered in a new age in terms of destructive armaments as well as the very real fear that a nuclear holocaust could eliminate the human race, and concern with nuclear weapons became central to all efforts at arms control thereafter. Indeed, it may be argued that the growth of ordinary (non-nuclear) armaments was given a boost because of the nuclear question since almost all the international efforts to control arms were focused upon nuclear weapons so that, by the mid-1980s, the world arms trade had grown to be worth US$500,000 million a year and more.

Unfortunately, after 1945 the possession of nuclear weapons came to be seen as the badge of great power status and by the 1990s, despite some genuine efforts to reduce nuclear armaments, their possession was still regarded in this light and there were no measurable indications that the nuclear big five (the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France) had any intention of renouncing their own weapons although they were ready enough to insist that no other nation should be permitted to obtain them. The argument for their possession is that they are a shield against a potentially hostile world; what the main nuclear powers have never satisfactorily explained is how, if this is the case, other states should not also have nuclear weapons for the same reason. Israel, sitting in the middle of what it sees as a highly hostile Arab world, has ignored big power pleas and created its own nuclear arsenal which is generally believed to include some 200 nuclear bombs or warheads. Israel apart, Argentina, Brazil, India, Iraq, North Korea, Pakistan and South Africa have the capability to produce nuclear weapons and in at least three of these cases have done so already while, altogether, about 40 countries are believed either to possess the capacity to make such weapons or to be well on the way to achieving the capability to do so. On the plus side, it appears that Argentina, Brazil and South Africa have halted their nuclear weapons