European Union Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference

Keynote Address

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Mr. Mark Fitzpatrick, Director, Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Programme, IISS; Executive Director, IISS-Americas; Co-Founder, EU Non-Proliferation Consortium,

Excellencies, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was so good to see so many familiar faces, including a couple of my distinguished predecessors, Sergio and Angela, in this room. I am truly impressed by the convening powers of Jacek and Mark.

At the outset I would like to thank the European Union Non-Proliferation Consortium for inviting me to speak today. Each of these four institutions continues to make a real contribution to the cause of a safer and more prosperous world.

I would be remiss if I didn’t thank the European Union and its member states for their strong support to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs. Without your generosity we would find it difficult to accomplish our broad mandate.

EU donations have helped build the universalisation and enhance the practical implementation of disarmament and non-proliferation commitments. EU funds have supported capacity-building and technical assistance, and raised public awareness, across the entire spectrum of our activities.

While I of course wish to thank you for your partnership and support, I wish today to go a step further. This year marks a number of anniversaries in disarmament and non-proliferation. It is the seventieth anniversary of the first resolution of the General Assembly, which called for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction. It is also the twentieth anniversary of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty’s adoption. It is not a cause for celebration, but a reminder of a job unfinished. And it has been thirty years since the historic summit at Reykjavik between the United States and the former Soviet Union, a turning point in the nuclear arms race. European Union Member States have made tremendous contributions to all of these milestones.

I also want to underscore the tremendous contributions of the governments and citizens in this great region to the United Nations, to multilateralism, to international peace and security, and to the rule of law. Living together on a continent that suffered two devastating world wars, you can certainly speak with some authority about the horrible consequences for humanity of that nightmare we call “total war”.

During your recovery from these tragedies, you have established and maintained an absolutely indispensable role in world affairs as a bridge builder in times of great political divisions. You mediated between the two nuclear superpowers during the darkest days of the Cold War and pioneered bold diplomatic approaches of peace, security, and reconciliation—
with some of your finest achievements in the fields of “détente” and the spirit of Helsinki. Your bridge building has helped not just to improve East/West relations, but also to strengthen North/South relations, not to mention your work in building bridges to link all countries behind some fundamental global public goods like protecting the environment, defending human rights, and advancing sustainable development.

This bridge building spirit was evident during many recent disarmament initiatives, including the Hague Code of Conduct on Ballistic Missiles, the Arms Trade Treaty and efforts to develop a code of conduct for the peaceful use of outer space. It was most recently displayed in the role the European Union played in finding a diplomatic solution to Iran’s nuclear programme.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need this spirit today more than ever. It is given greater urgency by a growing nexus of security threats. They are a tapestry of entrenched and emerging threats that is the product of globalisation and the fast evolving security environment. They are interlinked, transnational and cannot be addressed by one single State or one single organisation alone.

First, the risks and threats of an attack using chemical, biological, radiological or even nuclear material are rising. The taboo against chemical weapons has been repeatedly broken in the Middle East. The use of toxic chemicals as weapons of terror against civilian populations cannot be allowed to become the new normal.

In recent years there have been repeated warnings from the international scientific community that developments in science and technology have lowered every technological barrier to acquiring and using biological weapons.

The West Africa Ebola outbreak was a palpable reminder of the humanitarian and health crises a biological pathogen can unleash. A deliberate release designed to cause maximum infection could be much worse than a chemical weapons attack, yet there is no commensurate institutional structure or mechanism to prevent or respond to such an eventuality. We repeatedly reminded our Member States that despite a much higher risk, the institutional investment in this area is lower than in nuclear, chemical or radiological response mechanisms. We hope that the upcoming BWC Review Conference next week will address this problem.

The Nuclear Security Summit Process made significant progress in securing civilian nuclear material. The NSS process has concluded but the threat remains. Keeping this issue on the global agenda must be a priority.

Second, the world is experiencing a revolution in technology that is helping to drive innovation and equitable development. However, this same technology could be misused for malicious purposes with devastating results.
Our increasingly networked lives have also exposed us to vulnerabilities. These will only increase as we move towards an “internet of things” where actions in cyberspace could have destructive consequences in the physical world, the world we are living in. A cyberattack on critical infrastructure or, in a nightmare scenario, a nuclear or chemical facility, is becoming a real prospect that must be actively guarded against.

The international community of States is behind the curve, unfortunately. We live in a cyber age, but we have yet to develop the rules of the road that will ensure cyberspace is only used for peaceful purposes.

New technologies such as unmanned vehicles and artificial intelligence are also changing the face of war. Our rules-based international order requires a better understanding of how these new technologies should be governed to ensure compliance with international law, including international humanitarian law.

Finally, vicious non-state actors without any regard for human life have taken advantage of our globalised society’s open borders to wreak havoc. From Mosul to the streets of Paris and Brussels, the global illicit trade in weapons fuels these groups’ carnage and allows them to menace the most vulnerable elements of our communities. Alarmingly, they continue to actively seek all kinds of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear material.

This nexus of global challenges requires that all key players to work together to overcome them. Their global nature requires a global response. Divides must be bridged and differences overcome if we are to hold the perpetrators accountable for the despicable use of chemical weapons. Or if we are to create robust mechanisms that will protect us from and, if necessary, respond to a biological incident. Or if we are to fill the normative gap when it comes not just to cyber space, but also outer space, and to regulate those new technologies disrupting the status quo.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We often heard that security is a prerequisite for disarmament, but progress in disarmament has its own contributions to make in strengthening security. It does so by constraining military spending, limiting the arms trade to volatile areas, reversing and preventing arms races, and building trust and confidence in a world in which weapons of mass destruction have no legitimate place.

As Secretary-General Ban said in Reykjavik last month on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the historic summit between the United States and the former Soviet Union, [Quote] “Some may claim that security conditions today are not ripe for the pursuit of further nuclear disarmament. I say this view has it completely backwards. The pursuit of arms control and disarmament is precisely how we can break the tension and reduce conflicts.” [End quote].
The recent debate regarding the proposed ‘prohibition treaty’ has raised fundamental questions, from both sides of the fence. I do recognise key drivers of both camps in this room. Through this debate a number of questions have been raised. We consider two questions to be key: First, how will the path be charted from a prohibition treaty to the actual elimination of all nuclear weapons? Second, why has it proven more difficult to delegitimise nuclear weapons compared to all other weapons of mass destruction?

Humanity deserves answers to these questions and this requires inclusive engagement by all States because all States agree to the destination of a world free of nuclear weapons. But we still have differences on the path to get there. This is my plea to EU Member States and, indeed, to all Member States – to find a way to catalyse inclusive engagement, to agree on a path.

I remain hopeful that the Member States of this great European Union will continue to perform their characteristic bridge-building role. A pivotal European role in seeking to reconcile such differences, finding common ground, striking reasonable compromises, and building mutual trust and confidence can only be performed through active engagement.