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STRENGTHENING THE NPT

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I thought Ambassador Popowski's opening remarks, when he recommended that anyone who had the time should take a trip to Ypres, were extraordinarily apt. If you go to Ypres, you will find there a large war memorial called the Menin Gate, which has inscribed on it the words: 'Under this arch lie the remains of 55,000 servicemen whose bodies could not be identified'. I think that gives you some idea of why he said that is quite a good place to go when we reflect on the matters that are before us today.

Exactly a year ago almost to the day, when I was at the 2011 Munich Security Conference watching the Russian foreign minister and the US secretary of state exchanging the instruments of ratification for the new START treaty and thus bringing it into force, it was still possible to be reasonably upbeat about the prospects for nuclear disarmament and for the strengthening of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, even if some of the shine had already by then worn off President Obama's great speech in Prague in the spring of 2009. It was only six months, after all, from the latest in the quinquennial series of NPT review conferences had reached a consensus conclusion, which had included a decision to summon a conference in 2012 on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. That relative success in 2010 had done much to erase the memories of the ill-tempered fiasco in 2005, when the previous review conference had not even been able to agree on its own agenda, let alone on any substantive decisions.

Now, today, the prospects are, I am afraid, a good deal bleaker, and there is no possible justification for such a complacent approach. Why should that be so? There is little doubt that the priority attached to these nuclear issues by the main world leaders – unwisely, in my view – has waned. There has, under the pressure of the aftershocks from the great 2008 financial and economic crisis, been a marked tendency for countries to turn in on themselves and to turn their backs on the great global challenges that face us. There has been a weakening in support for the multilateral instruments and institutions, without which no effective progress in facing up to these challenges is likely to be made. Impending elections and transitions in a number of the main players – the US, France, Russia and China – have cast a deep shadow ahead of them, discouraging ambitious initiatives and courageous decisions.

More specifically in the nuclear field, there has been no progress – quite the contrary – in rolling back or even checking the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran; efforts to start negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament (CD) for a FMCT have been blocked by Pakistan; the issues of removing or at least reducing the number of tactical weapons in Europe and that of ballistic-missile defence remain inextricably entangled; and the continued turmoil in the Middle East following the events of the Arab Spring have led many to take a pessimistic view of the chances for the WMD-free zone conference planned for later this year arriving at any useful conclusions. And unfortunately, there is nothing by the way of good news to offset that litany of setbacks.

How best can the international community, and that important part of it represented by the EU and its member states – two of them, of course, recognised nuclear-weapon states – respond? Certainly not, I would suggest, by passive acquiescence and a fatalistic assumption that nothing much can be done to reverse this negative trend. That sort of response would be only too likely to lead to even worse outcomes. It needs to be recognised that the nuclear non-proliferation regime is under greater threat than it has ever been before in the 45 years of its existence and that we could very well pass a tipping point in the next few years, after which the world would become a much more dangerous and insecure place than it has been hitherto. There should be no illusions that there is likely to be a soft landing if either North Korea or Iran were to become fully fledged nuclear-weapon states, by which I mean having warheads that can be delivered in an effective way. At best, such developments would

be likely to trigger nuclear-arms races in two fragile and unstable regions; at worst, there could be military confrontations with unpredictable and far-reaching negative consequences.

A belief that a relatively stable balance of terror could be established, such as we had during the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, and such as one can suppose exists now more precariously between India and Pakistan, would seem to me altogether too Panglossian an interpretation. Less dramatically but just as insidiously, so far as international peace and security is concerned, if there is no progress in reducing the nuclear arsenals of the two principal, officially recognised nuclear-weapon states – the US and the Russia – and the degree of their alert status, and in moving towards a multilateral process involving all five of those officially recognised weapons states, the chances of achieving the necessary strengthening of non-proliferation disciplines on a worldwide basis would be much reduced.

The same can be said if the CTBT continues to languish in limbo and if negotiations for a FMCT remain blocked.

What, then, is to be done if a passive approach is so singularly unpromising? Here are a few random thoughts.

First, it is probably not very sensible to try to lay down detailed policy prescriptions for handling the threats from the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran. I cannot see any genuinely attractive alternatives to persevering with the existing twin-track policy of offering a wide-ranging multilateral dialogue on those two countries' security concerns together with a tightening of sanctions against them if they continue undeterred with the development of their plans. The handling of the new untried and inexperienced leader of North Korea will clearly present particularly delicate choices. In Iran's case, extension of the sanctions to cover its exports of oil is unavailable and, indeed, necessary if a negotiating channel is to be revived with any hope of a successful outcome.

Second, it is important, I would suggest, that NATO should be ready by the time of next year's Chicago summit to put on the table a credible approach to removing tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. Of course, it cannot and should not try to bring about that outcome simply by unilateral action, but nor should it retreat into obscure rhetorical formulations that are likely simply to lead to maintenance of the status quo. It does remain essential that attempts to dissipate the distrust between Russia and the US over ballistic-missile defence are not abandoned.

Third, preparations for the 2012 conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East should be pursued with determination and realism, despite the delayed start in appointing a facilitator and despite the continuing upheavals in the region and the reluctance of Israel to engage. This conference needs, surely, to be seen as the beginning of a process which will last well beyond 2012, not as a make-or-break meeting or just as a venue for confrontation.

Fourth, is it not time to be exploring ways around the deadlock over opening negotiations for a FMCT? In the case of a similar problem over the CTBT, a way was found of using the procedures of the UN General Assembly. That is one possible route and, in addition, could not the five recognised nuclear-weapon states that support that negotiations of such a treaty begin, in a rather public way, consultations over what it should ideally contain?

Fifth, it remains essential, I would argue, to strengthen the disciplines and to bolster the resources of the IAEA, which has played such a crucial role in recent years in alerting the world to and in handling the problems in North Korea and Iran – and I cannot fail to note Hans Blix's presence amongst us,

because he was the director general who came to the Security Council in the 1990s to say that there was something rather odd happening in North Korea and quite a lot of fissile material seemed to have disappeared into thin air. It had not disappeared into thin air, but to somewhere else. Is it not time to look again at the possibility of the Security Council making acceptance of the Additional Protocol mandatory for civil nuclear uses and of making its acceptance a condition of supply by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)?

Those are just a very few ideas – no doubt, many others will be aired at this conference – for a positive nuclear agenda for 2012. I do insist on that limitation because this is a short-term agenda that I have sketched out, not a long-term one. Realistically, one has to recognise that much will depend on the outcome of the US presidential election in November, but simply waiting for that and for the other changes that will take place this year among some of the main players and waiting for the necessary period after all these changes have allowed the dust to settle is likely to lead to missed opportunities and very possibly to the emergence of an even less promising situation than exists now. In each of the five areas I have identified, the EU and its member states have an important role. Let us just hope that the current distraction with the Eurozone crisis does not result in their failing to do so. Thank you very much.