

The Ninth European Union Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference

Virtual Event, 12–13 November 2020

Brief Conference Report

By

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The [Ninth EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference](#) (EUNPDC) was held virtually on 12 and 13 November 2020, to comply with the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Conference was organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) on behalf of the [EU Consortium of Independent Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Think Tanks](#), gathering experts on non-proliferation, disarmament, arms control and conventional weapons from public institutions, governments, international organisations, independent think tanks and civil society. The virtual format allowed the participation of over 450 experts from more than 54 countries – EU members, associated states and third countries – international organisations and research centres.

The EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference is one of the flagship events of the European Network of Independent Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Think Tanks. The Network was established in July 2010 by the Council of the European Union to support the implementation of [the EU Strategy Against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction](#). The Network, which also focuses on the implementation of the [EU Strategy Against Illicit Firearms, Small Arms & Light Weapons & Their Ammunition](#), brings together 100 research entities and is coordinated by a Consortium of six institutes: La Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (HSFK - PRIF), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP).

Since 2012, the annual Conference has been one of the key non-proliferation and disarmament meetings worldwide. It has contributed to promoting strategic discussion on measures to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems, as well as to address challenges

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related to conventional weapons, including their illicit trade and the excessive accumulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) and their ammunition.

The 2020 edition addressed numerous topics of central importance for the work of the EU and the [European External Action Service \(EEAS\)](#), as well as several pressing arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament issues, including: how to rebuild trust in the arms control process; ways to tackle arms diversion; the impact of artificial intelligence and related technologies; and the similarities between biological weapons and pandemics, drawing lessons from COVID-19.

Participants were welcomed by Ettore Greco, Executive Vice President of the Istituto Affari Internazionali. He emphasized that the EUNPD Network has made a constant effort to promote and enlarge the debate on the EU non-proliferation and disarmament strategy: its objectives, state of implementation and possible further developments. The annual EUNPD Conference is a key venue for such strategic discussion. The overarching question the conference aims to address is how to restore the necessary confidence in the arms control process, which has been dealt serious blows in recent times. One of the key issues of the conference's agenda is how to overcome the major obstacles to a positive outcome of the NPT review process. The global nuclear order, Greco added, appears much more unstable than in the past. He emphasized that while *“the EU is of course keen on forming broad coalitions to deal with proliferation issues [...] from a European perspective it is also essential that a meaningful dialogue resumes between U.S. and Russia in nuclear arms control”*. Greco noted that the mounting challenges to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) regime are a litmus test of the capacity of the international community to preserve the global arms control architecture. He added that technological advances are also putting new pressures on arms control regimes and raised growing concerns about new escalation risks. The global debate on how to regulate lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) has made some progress and the intra-European discussion on the matter has also deepened, but substantial obstacles remain to a convergence on the application of international humanitarian law to the new types of weapons.

The Conference was opened by a message of the Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. The HR/VP, noting the existence of *“increased geopolitical competition and global uncertainty over arms control, be it chemical, nuclear, or conventional weapons”*, called upon the international community to seek *“common ground to build lasting solutions”* for a peaceful future. Following the recent and *“worrisome”* uses of chemical weapons, he stated that the *“well-established norm against [them] must be respected”* and that *“those who violate it must be held accountable”*, underlining the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons *“objectivity and impartiality”*. The HR/VP also reiterated the EU's full commitment to and support for to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and its three pillars (non-proliferation, nuclear disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy) as well as to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Noting the large impact of conventional weapons on armed violence, Borrell called on States to provide data on their arms exports, following the EU's example. Finally, the HR/VP reaffirmed the EU's close cooperation with the United Nations and encouraged the

U.S. and Russia “to extend the New START Treaty” and to engage in negotiations “for broader future agreements”².

The United Nations Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, also delivered an opening speech. The HR mentioned the increasingly tense relationships between major powers, the record high military spending, the emergence of disruptive technologies and new weapons, as well as potential new domains of conflict as the primary causes of the erosion of the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. In her view, while “*the impending entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) highlights the enduring commitment of many States to the elimination of nuclear weapons*”, the growing role of such weapons in other countries’ national security strategies, together with the interconnection of these weapons with emerging technologies, have increased nuclear risks to unprecedented levels since the height of the Cold War. The use of chemical weapons, which she firmly condemned and defined as inhumane, has underscored the necessity to implement attribution and accountability mechanisms to identify and hold perpetrators accountable. Covid-19 has demonstrated the “*lack of preparedness at the national, regional and international level*”. Stressing that “*a disease deliberately manipulated to be more virulent, or one intentionally released in multiple venues at the same time, would lead to an even more serious global crisis*”, the HR called upon State Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) to strengthen the Convention, which currently “*lacks an oversight institution, contains no verification provisions and does not have an operationalized mechanism to provide and deliver assistance*”. The HR also mentioned the diversion and misuse of conventional arms, which continues to fuel arms conflicts taking human lives despite the UN Secretary General’s repeated call for a global ceasefire, and the concerning increase in cyber-attacks, which have spiked up during the pandemic. In such an environment, Nakamitsu stressed the need for practical arms control initiatives, creative thinking to meet emerging challenges and, above all, renewed cooperation and political leadership³.

Regional and country-specific perspectives were offered by representatives from several governments, leading to an at-times-heated yet honest and transparent debate.

The Chinese perspective was provided by Fu Cong, Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, who noted that “*unilateralist policies [...] Cold War mentality and double standard are impeding international non-proliferation cooperation and undermining the [regime’s] authority and effectiveness*”. In particular, according to Fu Cong, the U.S.’s behaviour “*aimed at establish[ing] a unipolar world*” and its “*continuous withdrawal [...] from international treaties*” are “*sabotaging the international arms control architecture*”. Against this backdrop, Fu Cong stressed the need to “*search for win-win solutions instead of playing a zero-sum game*” and urged the country to “*respond as soon as possible to Russia’s call for the unconditional extension of the New START*”. Fu Cong expressed China’s intention to maintain its minimum nuclear deterrence and no-first-use policy and not to expand its nuclear arsenal “*to a large extent*”. However, he affirmed that full transparency on numbers would “*undermine China’s strategic capability*”. Mentioning artificial intelligence, cyber and outer space, the DG emphasized the necessity to establish “*legally-binding international instruments or*

² Full video: <https://youtu.be/kT1EeX91vAQ>

³ Full speech: <https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Final-HRs-Statements-EU-1.pdf>

codes of conduct". He added that, in light of the Covid-19 outbreak, there is a need to establish verification mechanisms for the BWC. Addressing the non-proliferation disputes with Iran and North Korea, the DG argued that sanctions are ineffective and that only through "*political and diplomatic means*" and the acknowledgement of the "*legitimate security and development concerns*" of the two countries, such disputes can be resolved⁴.

Christopher Ford, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation at the U.S. Department of State offered the American perspective. He attributed the current state of affairs to Moscow and Beijing's "*destabilising geopolitical revisionism*". Specifically, he argued that Russian "*scofflaw self-aggrandizement*" and "*irresponsible choices*", including chronic violations and manipulation of agreements, have led the U.S. to take a firm stance and withdraw from important instruments such as the INF Treaty and the Open Skies. China's aggressive policy, dangerous nuclear build-ups, and reluctance in "*taking seriously its responsibility as a nuclear power*" and in engaging in risk-reduction diplomacy, are also sources of great concern, according to Ford. Nonetheless, "*we continue to prize dialogue and engagement, even with competitors whose global strategies threaten Americans' security and well-being*", he said. Furthermore, he reiterated the U.S. commitment to the nuclear extended deterrence, which represents "*the world's most successful non-proliferation tool*". Beyond the nuclear domain, Ford also expressed concerns over the emergence of chemical and biological weapons-related threats, condemning recent use of chemical weapons and noting the existence of "*a Russian biological weapons program*". Concluding his intervention, Ford insisted that the current geopolitical environment requires a strategy that combines "*elements of competition with elements of cooperation*" prioritizing "*dialogue and engagement*"⁵.

Marjolijn van Deelen, the Special Envoy for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), offered the European perspective. Believing that "*bilateral and multilateral dialogue*" can help develop a "*sophisticated understanding about others [...] policies*" and cultivate "*openness and transparency*", the Special Envoy affirmed that the EU is intensifying cooperation among institutions, Member States as well as third countries, with the aim of "*pushing forward on non-proliferation and disarmament matters*". As an example, van Deelen reported the EU's successful engagement with Western Balkan countries in tackling the illicit traffic of arms. The Special Envoy also mentioned the importance of cooperation with international organizations, reaffirming, for example, the EU's strong support for the OPCW's work. As "*the EU is much stronger when operating in unity*", the Special Envoy underscored the importance of joint instruments and mentioned the recently launched EU [online database on arms exports](#): a collective effort that demonstrates the EU's transparency efforts in non-proliferation and arms control. Van Deelen added that sustaining long-standing existing arms control efforts, as in the cases of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), is also crucial. The Special Envoy concluded her remarks by stressing the paramount importance of track 1.5 events like the EUNPD Conference, which connect academia and civil society with the "*governmental bubble*", feeding the latter with suggestions and ideas.

⁴ Full speech: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1832223.shtml

⁵ Full speech: <https://www.state.gov/arms-control-and-international-security-since-january-2017/>

The 2020 EUNPD Conference also hosted keynote speeches by Gustavo Zlauvinen, President-designate of the 2020 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and Fernando Arias, Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Further speakers included the Director of the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UNLIREC), Mélanie Régimbal, the Head of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) Secretariat, Dumisani Dladla, the Director of the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Gustav Lindstrom, along with renowned academics, researchers and government officials from around the world.

The concluding remarks were delivered by Sibylle Bauer, Chair of the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium and Director of Studies of the SIPRI Armament and Disarmament Programme. According to Bauer, the EUNPD Conference has demonstrated the significance of dialogue as a trust-building tool. *“Trust is the result of very hard work”* which requires *“respect, empathy, listening, win-win solutions, creative problem solving and [...]humanity. It is very important that the EU provides a platform for this very important dialogue”*. Bauer also emphasized the importance of independent research as a way to provide *“creative new thinking and fresh perspectives”* to respond to the perceived crisis of arms control and multilateralism, the threat and fear of arms races, and to change the international security environment, currently believed to be at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. *“We need a healthy dose of optimism”* to address this *“downward spiral”* and independent research is essential to move arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation forward. Finally, Bauer congratulated the EU for its support of the EUNPD Network, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary. She noted that over the years, the Network has significantly expanded, now reaching 100 institutions, and has increased its geographical diversity and its interdisciplinarity scope. The Network has placed growing emphasis on strengthening non-proliferation and disarmament education and incorporating gender perspectives and the next generation into its activities.

Despite the virtual format, the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Conference proved to be, once again, a central event for a multilateral discussion on arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. It also contributed to reaffirming the strong EU commitment towards the rules-based global order and showed the increased awareness of EU non-proliferation and disarmament policies among government officials, academics and civil society representatives of third countries. Moreover, the debate explored new ways and means of improving capacities in areas of the world with limited expertise in countering the threats related to SALW, WMD and their means of delivery. Finally, as every year, the Conference served as a venue to enhance the role and cohesion of European think tanks specialised in non-proliferation and disarmament.

For more information and to watch the videos of the Conference, please visit the Consortium’s website: www.nonproliferation.eu



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