North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Preventing WMD proliferation: NATO's engagement with its global partners

Speech by NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow at the annual NATO conference on WMD arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation - Doha, Qatar
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Mr. Minister,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address this eleventh Annual NATO Conference on WMD Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-proliferation. Over the past decade, this conference has turned into a truly global forum for frank and open dialogue on non-proliferation and disarmament.

Our conference brings together all the key players and organizations that are involved in non-proliferation efforts. Because the format of our conference is both informal and intimate, we can have a frank and open discussion which is more difficult in other international meetings on this topic. And to have such an open discussion is all the more important this year when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is up for review

This year’s conference also has another special dimension. It is the first to take place outside of Europe. And it takes place here in Qatar only a few months after a visit by the Secretary General and the North Atlantic Council, when we celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative.

This is a strong demonstration of the important role that NATO attributes to engaging with partner countries here in the Gulf region. And I would like to thank our hosts for their warm hospitality and for all the hard work that went into organizing our meeting.

We meet at a critical time for the security of all our nations: in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

In Europe, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has violated a rule that we thought was firmly established in Europe: that the sovereignty of independent nations is sacrosanct, and that borders must never be changed by force. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its

continuing destabilization of Eastern Ukraine have put the European security system – and all the rules and agreements that underpin it – under severe strain.

Russia's modus operandi in the Ukraine conflict is often described as "hybrid warfare": a mix of regular and irregular forces, support for separatists, cyber attacks, and propaganda. But the conflict also has a WMD dimension. Russia has stepped up its nuclear exercises and integrated a nuclear component into conventional exercises. Russian bombers have been flying closer to Allied borders. And the Russian leadership has been boasting about the development of new nuclear weapons. Perhaps this is mostly rhetoric, but it is highly irresponsible.

The same holds true for Russia's breach of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. In this agreement, Russia had committed to uphold Ukraine's territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine transferring former Soviet nuclear weapons back to Russia. Some Ukrainians are now wondering whether they should have kept the weapons they once inherited, rather than giving them away in exchange for a worthless promise. Other countries may wonder, too, and that's not good news for the future of our non-proliferation efforts.

As a result, we have no choice but to re-think our approach to Russia and its trustworthiness as an international partner. We do not want to see our past achievements in arms control, confidence-building and transparency evaporate. Russia should realize that, by violating its commitments, by avoiding transparency, and by making its neighbors feel insecure, it also diminishes its own security. But for the time being, there is no sign Russia yet realizes that.

Here in the Gulf and the Middle Eastern region, the security challenges may be different, but they are no less severe. We face an unresolved conflict in Syria, sectarian tensions and terrorism in Iraq, and a power struggle in Yemen. The so-called 'Islamic State' continues to spread fear and destruction across the region. It is reportedly interested in acquiring chemical weapons from old Iraqi sites. And it is inspiring people to commit terrorist acts in Europe.

And there is more. While diplomatic efforts have been pursued for more than ten years, Iran has not convinced the international community that its nuclear activities are entirely for civilian purposes. A verifiable agreement that meets the requirements of the international community could have enormous benefits for the security of the entire region. But until such an agreement is reached, insecurity and suspicion will linger.

A further area where some frustration has been expressed is the limited progress towards the creation of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. To establish a regime that takes account of everyone's security interests was always going to be very challenging. But we also know that some nations consider progress in this area to be an important element of the wider non-proliferation bargain. And that is why we are very lucky to have the Facilitator for the Helsinki Process, Undersecretary Jaakko Laajava, with us today to update us on his efforts.

Another important subject for our conference is the future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The NPT remains a cornerstone of the international non-proliferation regime. The next Review Conference is only two months away. The topic of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East is one of several contentious issues on the agenda, and reaching a satisfactory outcome won't be easy.

Yet it is critical that the Treaty be upheld, and that we do not allow it to be undermined by countries such as North Korea, which are pursuing WMD programs that are in clear violation of the provisions and the spirit of the Treaty.

Several countries – inside and outside the Treaty – continue to increase their nuclear arsenals and to develop new types of weapons. This only increases the frustration of other countries about the slow progress of further disarmament efforts.

We can already see some of this frustration turning into policy initiatives: for example, the discussions outside the NPT framework on "outlawing" nuclear weapons due to their humanitarian impact. I do not doubt the moral foundation of such efforts. But one thing is clear: they should not distract from the key objectives of the Treaty. We need to take great care to maintain the integrity of the NPT and its entire web of obligations.

So we see worrying developments in several areas. But do they mean that we are helpless? Do they mean that WMD proliferation is something that will proceed largely beyond our control?

I don't think so. We have the means to do something about it. Indeed, if we look back at the history of international non-proliferation efforts, we can see many positive achievements. We have seen considerable unity of purpose across the international community. And many states have given up their ambitions to acquire weapons of mass destruction and dismantled their programs.

Indeed, it was only very recently that the international community scored a huge non-proliferation success. First, Syria joined the Chemical Weapons Convention, then the declared chemical weapons were removed from Syria, and then its production and storage facilities were destroyed.

This has greatly reduced a serious WMD risk for the region. I am proud to say that NATO Allies played an important role in this endeavor. And I hope it will serve as an incentive for other countries in the region to ratify the CWC and other WMD treaties.

To be clear: doubts on the completeness of Syria's declarations remain. There are also still worries about the use of other toxic chemicals, such as Chlorine, by the Syrian Regime. And sooner rather than later the international community must also address the challenge posed by other chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) material from past WMD

programs that still remains in Syria and Iraq. But the case of Syrian chemical weapons shows that it is possible to meet the non-proliferation challenge.

I firmly believe that further success will require two things: first, all countries, and all international institutions, must play their part. And second, we need an open and frank debate on what the challenges are and how we can address them.

At NATO, we are consistently trying to use the structures and mechanisms of our Alliance to strengthen the non-proliferation regime.

Our cooperation with partner countries reflects this very clearly. When it comes to capacity building to defend against WMD, CBRN and terrorist threats, NATO is engaged with many countries, including here in the region, through training courses, exercises, and scientific cooperation.

In Kuwait, for example, we are organizing a ‘CBRN first responders’ course. In Egypt, NATO’s Science for Peace and Security Programme is financing a large de-mining project that will help save many lives. And for many years, officials and experts from the region have participated in numerous workshops and training courses run by NATO institutions, such as our NATO School in Oberammergau and our CBRN Centre of Excellence in the Czech Republic.

These steps contribute to enhancing our collective expertise on dealing with the proliferation challenges of the 21st century. And above all, they help to create a true community of people who are ready to deal with common challenges together.

Which brings me to our second task: to continue to engage in a frank and open debate. This is what our conference today is all about. We have invited many distinguished speakers. But there will also be ample time for discussion, both here in this room and in the margins of our programme. And that is a very deliberate decision.

Almost seventy years have passed since the end of World War II. There will be big commemorations in Europe in the spring and in the Pacific region later this year. These events should remind us of the disastrous consequences of inhuman ideologies coupled with military expansionism and advanced weaponry.

But the end of World War II also marked a new beginning, with the creation of a range of multinational institutions – from the United Nations to NATO, and from the International Atomic Energy Agency to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. All these institutions were based on the realization that the search for national security requires more than just national efforts. And they have all proven their effectiveness many times over the past few decades.

It is this fundamental truth that brings us here today. The goal of our conference is not to arrive at unanimous positions, but at a better understanding of each other’s views. The

famous physicist Werner Heisenberg once said that knowledge emerges through dialogue. So let us heed Heisenberg’s advice. I wish us all a very successful conference.

Thank you

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