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United States Mission to the OSCE **U.S. Statement Annual Security Review Conference**

Working Session III: Conventional Arms Control and Confidence and Security Building Measures: Challenges and Opportunities

As delivered by Bruce Turner
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary
for Verification, Planning, and European Security
Vienna, June 25, 2020

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Even in the so-called “more normal” times before the coronavirus pandemic, compliance with and adherence to conventional arms control obligations and commitments was already one of the major challenges facing our community.

I will agree with what our Russian colleague just said that context is very important. This is why, on May 22, the United States submitted to the Treaty depositories, and other States Parties, notification of its decision to withdraw from the Treaty on Open Skies. As Secretary Pompeo stated, it was no longer sustainable for the United States to continue to participate in a Treaty that has been violated by Russia over many years. As we all know, these violations are part of a broader pattern of Russian noncompliance with a host of agreements and commitments, including those that the OSCE holds most dear. Russia has also attempted to use the Treaty to advance its propaganda narratives against the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine, not to mention its actual activities in those two countries. We may be willing to reconsider this decision if Russia demonstrates a return to full compliance, but without such a change of course from the Kremlin, our path will lead to withdrawal in six months’ time.

The United States does not view the pandemic as relieving participating States of their obligations and commitments. That said, the decision by participating States to pause verification activities at present while we all determine how best to safely resume those activities in the future under these difficult circumstances was and is the right one. We view implementation of those obligations and commitments as merely “paused” at present, by mutual assent. Although, we will need to be flexible in practice as we determine when, where, and how we resume our activities. There can be no one-size-fits-all solution.

At the June 4 Structured Dialogue, we proposed considering ways to mitigate health risks for teams conducting verification activities, potentially including sending smaller teams temporarily, and exploring the use of select virtual technologies to conduct some activities. We also called for a military experts discussion to consider the impact of COVID on military activities and verification.

We will all need to work together to ensure that military activities and the tools of conventional arms control and military transparency do not themselves become a vector for COVID-19 to propagate itself. There are important lessons to be learned from the risk mitigation actions we have taken, and it seems evident to us that COVID-19 could have longer impacts on both military activities and conventional arms control than can be currently foreseen.

What the ongoing pandemic should not and need not prevent, however, is work on updating the Vienna Document to make it more relevant to the current political-military environment in the Euro-Atlantic region. The joint proposal supported by 34 participating States to modernize the Vienna Document remains the most comprehensive and realistic approach to bolster stability and predictability, reduce risks, and promote military transparency. It is our opportunity to respond to the challenges described in the working sessions of this ASRC. We need to make substantial progress this year.

The pandemic is also not a reason to allow ourselves to be tempted by purely voluntary measures such as reporting and information sharing. While such voluntary measures may have some utility during the current crisis, they are not a substitute for standardized and reciprocal measures to which all participating States commit. There is no reason to believe, particularly in light of experience so far with adherence and implementation issues that voluntary measures will be uniformly implemented by all, or by all equally. Nor would such voluntary transparency measures benefit from commonly understood standards of implementation.

To conclude, we urge all participating States to engage actively to increase military transparency and reduce risk by working with us to update the Vienna Document. We hope all participating States will join in an effort to make the Vienna Document more relevant to the current security environment and achieve full consensus on its comprehensive update. The sooner, the better. In parallel, we look forward to constructively and pragmatically working with other participating States to meet the immediate challenges of conventional arms control life in the time of coronavirus.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.