

EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium

Promoting the European network of independent non-proliferation and disarmament think tanks

E-newsletter of the European Network of Independent Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Think Tanks

NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES OF THE BELGIAN EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY, AN INTERVIEW WITH SIGURD SCHELSTRAETE



Sigurd Schelstraete is a seasoned diplomat and currently serves as the Director of Disarmament and Non-Proliferation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brussels, Belgium, a position he has held since July 2018. In this role, he oversees matters related to weapons of mass destruction, conventional weapons, and missiles. His division plays a crucial role in coordinating Belgium's arms control policy in various international organizations and treaties, including NPT, CTBT, IAEA, OPCW, and others.

In your opinion, what are the main and emerging challenges in the non-proliferation and disarmament field?

There is a lack of a functioning negotiation platform to deal with the two files - Iran and DPRK - that threaten to upend the premises upon which the fragile nuclear non-proliferation regime is built. New START is at risk of withering away. More generally, global norms are at risk. In principle, we should rejoice over the dismantlement of all declared chemical weapon stockpiles under the Chemical Weapons Convention, but in reality the taboo on chemical weapons use has been broken – hundreds of times and with blatant impunity. The shameless breaching of treaties and the violation of the territorial integrity of a sovereign European nation cast a shadow over the enduring value of international agreements in a context of “alternative truths.” We have also witnessed the erosion of international consensus on a broad range of topics, in particular due to Russian behaviour, sometimes aided by a “coalition of the unwilling.” The consensus rule is more and more used as a veto and could force us to find new – less universal – venues to push for arms control. The disarmament machinery creaks, the arms industry booms and new technologies such as AI pose risks.

What do you think the EU and its member states can do to make the Union's role more effective in addressing these challenges?

I am afraid the era of international confrontation and institutional gridlock has only just begun. We need to stick to our principles, but add more pragmatism. Difficult times call for more realism. We should carefully gauge whether a conference without an outcome is preferable over one with a modest result. Results should matter more than indignation. Internally compromise should be favoured over fundamentalism. Unity of the 27 is paramount, but if we fall short of that, we should find an innovative way to have our voice heard.

Based on the replies above, what are the priorities of the current Belgian EU Presidency in the non-proliferation and disarmament field?

Our first task is assisting the EEAS who has the leading role in coalescing the Member States and setting out common policies and approaches. From a national point of view, we are attached to what the UN Secretary-General has called “disarmament that saves lives.” We therefore seek more attention for the conventional field: small arms are mass killers, mines and cluster munition are hideous weapons that kill and maim long after conflict. Given the influential role of the EU common position on arms trade, we hope its revision will strengthen coherence and open the road for new forms of cooperation, for instance on post shipment control. At the UN level, the PoA on SALW should progress on the issue of new technologies and their impact on the marking of weapons. The Ottawa Convention should make headway on the decontamination of mine fields. Finally, after ten years of discussions, negotiations need to start on a binding instrument regarding autonomous weapon systems, preferably within the CCW context, but if not possible, then other avenues should be explored.

THE COMING END OF CFE?

On 24 February 2022 Putin started his attack on Ukraine blatantly violating the normative apparatus of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), a cornerstone of the post-Cold War European security environment which limits key categories of weapons. In response to this unprovoked and illegal aggression two long-standing neutral countries – Finland and Sweden – applied for membership of NATO (the former is now member of the alliance while the latter is set to join it soon). Russia used this enlargement as its main reason to withdraw from the CFE on 7 November 2023. On the same day, all NATO countries announced the suspension of their membership of the treaty by 4 April 2024. However, this decision was said to be “reversible” if Russia returned to the treaty and ended its war against Ukraine.

The CFE treaty, negotiated during the latter stages of the Cold War, aimed to prevent the risk of surprise and large-scale attacks in Europe by reducing all conventional forces by 50 percent based on the principle of parity between the two alliances (i.e. NATO and Warsaw Pact). Its area of application covers Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. Five major categories of land and air forces (tanks, artillery, armoured combat vehicles, combat aircraft and attack helicopters) are subjected to limitations. However, the alliance approach had already become outdated when the treaty entered into force in November 1992 because of the collapse of the Eastern bloc. Moreover, faced with the emerging security vacuum and the perceived risk of a resurgent Russian threat, Central and East-European countries wanted to join NATO. This increased the pressure to adapt the CFE to the new security situation. In 1999 all parties signed the adapted CFE Treaty (aCFE) in Istanbul, which introduced a new system of national limits, and territorial limits for deployed forces based on host nation consent. NATO also committed not to deploy substantial combat forces in new member states with similar constraints for Russia. However, the aCFE never entered into force. NATO countries did not link alliance enlargement to the aCFE and Russia did not fulfil its Istanbul commitments to withdraw its forces from Georgia and Moldova. In 2007 Russia suspended the implementation of CFE while in 2008 NATO offered Ukraine and Georgia the prospect of membership at an indefinite time. Mistrust grew after the Russian illegal annexation of the Crimea peninsula and the destabilisation of the Eastern Ukraine in 2014. German attempts at damage limitation through the informal Structured Dialogue in the OSCE context – supported by many like-minded states – have so far failed to revive conventional arms control. In 2021 Russia used the unprovoked concentration of forces against the Ukraine to demand an unrealistic return to the European security situation prior to 1997, which NATO rejected.

NATO has suspended the CFE to prevent Russia from accessing CFE data and notification exchanges through Belarus, which has remained a CFE member. Moreover, without the suspension, the United States would have been obliged to follow CFE flank restrictions and notification requirements when moving its units to Bulgaria and Romania. As mentioned, NATO keeps the door open to new agreements on conventional arms control but Russia's continued aggression against Ukraine makes this prospect highly unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Hans-Joachim Schmidt, Associate Fellow, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)

Latest Publications

AI and nuclear command, control and communications: P5 perspectives. Alice Saltini. European Leadership Network (ELN). November 2023

Special Issue: Nuclear Non-Proliferation and the Global South: Understanding Divergences and Commonalities. Manuel Herrera, Tanvi Kulkarni and Vicente Garrido. The International Spectator. December 2023

Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Ambitions: Frozen Once Again?. Manuel Herrera. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). November 2023

French deterrence in the third nuclear age. Emmanuelle Maitre. Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS). December 2023

Network Calls

The Alva Myrdal Centre for Nuclear Disarmament is recruiting a Senior lecturer in Peace and Conflict research, specialising in Nuclear Disarmament

More info: [Here](#)

The Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (VCDNP) is recruiting an intern for spring-summer 2024.

More info: [Here](#)

EU NEWS

COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2023/2539 OF 13 NOVEMBER 2023 SUPPORTING A PROJECT ON THE PROMOTION OF EFFECTIVE ARMS EXPORT CONTROLS

THE EU COUNCIL HAS ADOPTED THIS DECISION WITH A VIEW TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EU STRATEGY AGAINST ILLICIT FIREARMS, SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS AND THEIR AMMUNITION AND COUNCIL COMMON POSITION 2008/944/CFSP. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT ARE TO PROMOTE EFFECTIVE CONTROLS ON ARMS EXPORTS BY THIRD COUNTRIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PRINCIPLES SET OUT IN COMMON POSITION 2008/944/CFSP AND IN THE ARMS TRADE TREATY (ATT); AND SUPPORT THIRD COUNTRIES' EFFORTS AT NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL TO RENDER TRADE IN CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS MORE RESPONSIBLE AND TRANSPARENT, AND TO MITIGATE THE RISK OF THE DIVERSION OF ARMS TO UNAUTHORISED USERS. THE PROJECT ACTIVITIES WILL BE IMPLEMENTED IN COMPLEMENTARITY AND SYNERGY WITH UNION ASSISTANCE PROJECTS IN THE FIELD OF EXPORT CONTROLS ON CONVENTIONAL ARMS AND DUAL-USE GOODS, AND, WHEN APPROPRIATE, WITH OTHER DONORS' ASSISTANCE PROJECTS IN THE FIELD OF EXPORT CONTROLS. THE PROJECT WILL BE IMPLEMENTED BY THE GERMAN FEDERAL OFFICE FOR ECONOMIC AFFAIRS AND EXPORT CONTROL.

MORE INFO: [HERE](#)

NETWORK NEWS

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

THE SPRING ACADEMY ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND INTERNATIONAL LAW IS AN INNOVATIVE ONE-WEEK TRAINING PROGRAMME CARRIED OUT BY ASSER INSTITUTE, LAUNCHED IN 2019. THE PROGRAMME WILL PROVIDE INSIGHTS INTO THE CURRENT AND FUTURE ISSUES RAISED BY AI TECHNOLOGIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW AND RELATED DISCIPLINES. REGISTER NOW FOR THE NEXT EDITION, WHICH WILL TAKE PLACE IN THE WEEK OF 22–26 APRIL 2024.

MORE INFO: [HERE](#)

2024 CHATHAM HOUSE SECURITY AND DEFENCE CONFERENCE

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IS FACING A NUMBER OF SERIOUS STRATEGIC CHALLENGES. WARS IN EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST ORIGINATING FROM LONG-STANDING GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS, RISING PRESSURE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION, AND RESOURCE SCARCITY DRIVING FURTHER INSTABILITY ACROSS MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD.

AS WELL AS RE-EVALUATING TRADITIONAL ASPECTS OF MODERN WARFARE – LIKE LAND, SEA AND AIR DEFENCES – THE DEFENCE ECOSYSTEM IS CONFRONTING THE GROWING RISKS OF CYBER AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) TO CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE, AS WELL AS THE OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY THESE NEW TECHNOLOGIES. 2024 PRESENTS A TRULY UNCERTAIN AND UNSTABLE ENVIRONMENT FOR SECURITY POLICYMAKERS, BESET WITH ACUTE CHALLENGES. BUT IT ALSO CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALLIANCES AND INSTITUTIONS TO BE STRENGTHENED AND REFORMED TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE FIT FOR PURPOSE.

THE 2024 CONFERENCE WILL EXPLORE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHANGING GLOBAL SECURITY ORDER, AS WELL AS THE NATURE OF CONFLICT AND THE POTENTIAL AVENUES FOR ENHANCED COOPERATION ON ISSUES OF COMMON AND STRATEGIC INTEREST TO SUCCESSFULLY TACKLE 21ST-CENTURY THREATS.

MORE INFO: [HERE](#)



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