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THE IMPACT OF RECENT EVENTS ON MULTILATERAL DISARMAMENT EFFORTS

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Keynote speech

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I thank the Center for Security and Defense in Europe (CESEDEN) and the Rector of Nebrija University, as well as Professor Martin Ramirez and his colleagues in CICA for inviting me to address this Conference at the opening of its Scientific Program. I notice that the topics on the agenda deal mainly with specific European defense concerns, a subject on which I do not feel myself especially qualified to intervene. Minister Ana Palacios has just done this quite efficiently. As you know, I come from a different part of the world. One can say that over the past few centuries South America remained relatively insulated from the main tensions and rivalries that have ravaged the Northern Hemisphere. However, the peoples who settled there since the 16th century came predominantly from Europe, initially precisely from the Iberian peninsula. Together with an important influx from other parts of the world they produced a population attuned to what happens in the world around them and equally concerned with the disquieting trends currently noticeable in international affairs. The countries in the continent have made continuous and important contributions to the security and stability of the region and of the world at large. Suffice it to mention the creation of the Organization of American States, whose roots go as far back as the mid-eighteen-hundreds, much before the League of Nations and the United Nations itself; the pioneer negotiation of the first zone free of nuclear weapons through the Treaty of Tlatelolco, later emulated by other four regions of the world; and the unprecedented agreement on mutual inspections by Brazil and Argentina. Our countries also participated decisively in the genesis and negotiation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Based on our own experience I shall permit myself to make some general considerations on world affairs.

It is an axiom of natural science that Nature does not make jumps. In the realm of international politics, however, it seems that sometimes events follow one another in a succession of leaps that

completely reverse previous established positions. The deep and in many cases sudden changes that took place in the world recently have affected evaluations and decisions in many countries.

During Barack Obama's mandate, for instance, differences between the Senate majority and the President already sent mixed signals about the way in which the United States looked at questions related to arms control in general. Donald Trump's motto "America first" seemed initially to signal a retrenchment of the United States, a search for self-sufficiency within its own borders, or a nostalgia for a return to the days when the nation felt stronger and better equipped to wield its influence over the rest of the globe according to its values, beliefs and interests. Recent decisions and moves by the current Administration, including the abandonment of the Paris climate agreement and of the Global Compact on Migration carry a message of preference for unilateral action in foreign affairs. This trend leaves many governments unsure of how to conduct business with America. At present, Europe strives to minimize the negative effects of Washington's unilateral denunciation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and to prevent its unraveling. That decision caused much concern and elicited almost universal disapproval, even by the staunchest of American allies. Donald Trump's stance seems guided primarily by a strong desire to undo whatever was achieved by his predecessor and by ideological beliefs, rather than by deep reasoning.

Among the main immediate consequences of America's withdrawal from the JCPOA are: a distancing between the US and its European partners; a dismissal of the value of the technical competence and professionalism of the IAEA; and a deepening lack of confidence in the willingness of Washington to live up to its international commitments. It also highlights a reinforcement of the strategic alliance between the U.S. and Israel and a strengthened American partnership with another Iranian rival, Saudi Arabia. These are major geopolitical consequences of the American withdrawal that are bound to shape events in that part of the world and beyond for the foreseeable future. The rest of the world follows the evolving situation with considerable anxiety, for the possibility of actual military action across the region cannot be lightly dismissed.

Although the total value of commercial transactions between Europe and the United States is much higher than between European countries and Iran the move away from the JCPOA will bring significant losses to companies trading with Teheran. It is also likely to result in increased doubts about the permanence of multilateral norms on trade relations. The European Union has the possibility to use legal

remedies to try to offset the damage to its companies that do business with Iran, but this may bring unintended political and economic consequences in both sides of the Atlantic.

Washington's latest demands to Iran have elicited strong reaction from the hard-liners in the countries involved. Radical elements in Iran are seeking political advantages, as are those in the United States. Episodes of military confrontation between Iran and Israel in Syria have already occurred, adding to the tragic loss of life resulting from the protracted conflict in that part of the world. The recent events in the border of Gaza with the use of non-proportional military force fueled sentiment against Israel and the United States.

The mass exodus of refugees from the Middle East toward Europe contributes to aggravate political and social problems in some Western countries. Random attacks by terrorists increase the sense of insecurity and contribute to exacerbate racist and xenophobic sentiment. This state of affairs does not seem likely to improve in the foreseeable future, as the situation in parts of the Middle East, as well as in North and sub-Saharan Africa continues to deteriorate with the rise of sectarian extremism.

Optimism over the possibility of starting negotiations for the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East is all but abandoned. This prospect was decisive for the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. Hope for positive action was rekindled at the NPT Review Conference in 2010, but efforts to start substantive negotiations again failed. The promise of establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in that region, already seen at the time as a distant possibility, seems now even farther away from being realized.

Recent moves by different actors in the international scene have also drastically altered the panorama of relations among other States. The sudden acceleration of North Korea's nuclear program startled the world and caused deep concern in Japan. Calls for drastic changes in Japan's constitution and in its nuclear policies have been heard from different quarters. China felt the need to bring its considerable influence to bear on Pyongyang as Beijing continues to expand its reach and leverage in the Pacific region. Russia is another interested actor in Northeast Asia and has strengthened its ties with North Korea. We should not forget that Russia is also a Pacific power.

The development by the DPRK of missiles seemingly capable of carrying a nuclear warhead across the Pacific to the mainland of the United States prompted the leaders of both countries to engage in a series of unprecedented verbal attacks and threats that brought fears of actual military action by one or the other side. Signals emitted at the highest level as well as by close advisers seemed to oscillate between conciliatory and outright offensive even after North Korea unilaterally announced that it was suspending all tests of nuclear weapons and carried out what it described as the total destruction of its known facilities for such tests. Meanwhile, tensions between the DPRK and the Republic of Korea show signs of improvement, as dramatically symbolized by the historic meeting between the leaders of both countries at the Demilitarized Zone and further demonstrations of good-will by both sides.

This was followed by relative optimism despite further derogatory exchanges between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. The North Korean leader seems eager to see the DPRK rescued from the category of “rogue nation” and his regime recognized as worthy of direct negotiations on a par with the United States. This obviously will not be enough to solve the many differences between them. For his part, Donald Trump looks at ensuring his place in history as a builder of peace, even if this means the establishment of *pax americana* based on nuclear legions. The off-again, on-again meeting between Kim Jon-un and Donald Trump is finally set to be held tomorrow in Singapore. There is renewed hope that it can deliver meaningful results. The expression “denuclearization” seems to mean different things to different parties and the stated goals of each of them need further clarification. Still to be discussed and agreed is the DPRK’s objective of obtaining credible security guarantees, particularly in the light of the Libyan precedent and the unilateral American withdrawal from the JCPOA. Despite these and other obscure points, Washington and Pyongyang showed considerable interest in avoiding a total derailment of the preparations and worked diligently behind the scene. However, it is hard to define what a “successful” outcome can be. None of the two contenders can risk appearing as the loser.

It is confounding to note, in this regard, that as pressure mounts on the DPRK to totally dismantle its incipient nuclear weapon capability, no mention is made either in the press or in specialized commentary in the nuclear-armed countries and their allies about the obligation to pursue progress in nuclear disarmament by those who possess the largest arsenals.

It must be recognized that some of events of the not so distant past led to the hope that progress would indeed be possible. However, it did not take long after the conclusion of Start-II in 2009 for the prospect

of new, positive developments to be dampened. The United States and Russia decided to couple the agreed reductions in nuclear arsenals with the “modernization” of armaments. The common aspiration of the international community to see further measures of disarmament still has not materialized. Both countries seem again engaged in an effort to maintain their status as military and nuclear-weapon superpowers in order to counter what they regard as looming threats. Despite a few initial goodwill gestures both before and after the inauguration of the current American president, Moscow and Washington have not yet found the path for constructive cooperation that seemed possible in the first two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union. Leadership by the two most heavily armed nations on Earth is crucial to further disarmament efforts and to the collective security of the world as a whole. Unfortunately, such leadership is still lacking.

Current instruments in the field of disarmament recognize the possession of nuclear weapons only until they are completely eliminated and call for action to achieve this objective. However, this basic premise has been increasingly misinterpreted by means of the distorted notion that those instruments somehow legitimize the exclusive and indefinite retention of such armament and condone the continued postponement of specific measures to abolish it. In the absence of strong, legally binding commitments to nuclear disarmament with clear timelines, possessor States seem to feel entitled to keep their arsenals at least well into future decades and to use them in the circumstances they deem adequate.

The resurgence of tensions between the Atlantic alliance and Russia, now devoid of its own defensive circle of dependent nations, has intensified military competition between the two sides of the friction line. The immediate consequence was the resumption of the climate of mistrust and hostility and a disquieting trend to a gradual lack of confidence in and the abandonment of bilateral agreements that had brought about a measure of stability in the relationship between East and West. More recently, the publication of official defense doctrine documents in the United States and Russia shows that each regards the other as an adversary to be deterred, or contained by ever more destructive forces. With this objective in mind, both seem intent to build new generations of nuclear weapons that they claim to be more “usable” and “acceptable”. At the same time, advanced war-fighting technologies are being rapidly developed.

President Putin’s state of the nation speech last March warned that Russia now possesses new nuclear weapons that can overcome any defenses and does not exclude their use. These weapons now include

advanced underwater drones, intercontinental missiles and an undetectable hypersonic system that allegedly could reach any place in the world.

The recently published United States Nuclear Posture Review perceives a rapidly deteriorating threat environment in which potential nuclear-armed adversaries of the United States are increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons. It also foresees the use of so-called “low yield” weapons, three times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb. Furthermore, the document expands the circumstances in which the United States would consider employing nuclear weapons to include “non-nuclear strategic attacks.” Accordingly, expenditures of more than US\$700 billion on defense over the next fiscal year are being planned.

In such a situation, it is clear that a revival of bilateral nuclear reductions has no place in the calculations of both the United States and Russia. Indeed, it would seem that after having secured the indefinite extension of the NPT the two superpowers and their allies lost interest in further disarmament initiatives. In the multilateral field, the deadlock that existed for over twenty years at the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament was recently broken by a long-awaited procedural agreement on its work program. Observers, however, are skeptical of major breakthroughs since the newly created subsidiary bodies are not charged with actual negotiations.

It is possible that the Conference resume consideration of the negotiation an agreement on fissile materials, an issue that up to now has proven deeply divisive. Promoters of the negotiation argue that this question is now ripe for practical action and propose that further production of fissile material for weapons purposes be outlawed by the new instrument. This would leave untouched the huge stocks amassed by the possessors of nuclear weapons, which would be enough for rapidly increasing their active arsenals. For this reason, others warn that a cut-off treaty would in fact be innocuous from the point of view of disarmament. Moreover, they add, it would be redundant from the point of view of proliferation, since the totality of non-nuclear weapon States are already prohibited from acquiring such weapons under the NPT and are subject to verification procedures.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that mainstream media in countries with the most powerful military forces, as well as in those that have predicated their security on weapons not under their own control continually publish stories and commentary about the need to counter external threats through

the strengthening of their armed forces, but very rarely publicize and promote peace proposals. Readers are continually reminded of the danger posed by weapons that may some day be developed by current non-possessors, while those that already exist are extolled as necessary to keep peace and stability. In other words, existing weapons and the military technological race between major rivals - and their ensuing risks -, are tolerated while the dangers of their use by design or accident are ignored or dismissed. At the same time, great importance is assigned to the need to prevent new countries from acquiring the same means of defense that the nuclear powers consider so essential to their security. A culture of confrontation and permanent belligerence among the armed nations seems to have taken precedence over the search for peace and understanding. Nuclear armed States insist that the current security conditions in the real world do not allow for nuclear disarmament, at least for the foreseeable future. Observers, for their part, point out that the very postures and deeds of the armed States have the effect of increasing tensions and perpetuating the climate of mistrust and insecurity.

The moving of the Doomsday Clock to two minutes to midnight is a dramatic reminder of the imminent dangers posed by nuclear weapons and of the imperative for their elimination. It amounts to a serious and timely warning that demands urgent national and international measures to control and finally ban nuclear weapons as the best guarantee against their actual use in conflict.

Over the decades since 1945 a number of multilateral agreements sought quite successfully to deal with weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, chemical and bacteriological. Despite their importance, however, two of those treaties are not yet in force.

The 1996 Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) is one of them. Eight key States still hesitate either to sign and/or ratify it, a necessary condition for the entry into force of the instrument. The decision by Kim Jong-un to suspend the testing of nuclear weapons by North Korea may bring about important shifts in the attitudes of the outliers, including North Korea itself.

The other important instrument not yet in force is Treaty on The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons leading to their complete elimination. It was adopted last year by a large majority of States. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to ICAN for its role in this outcome contributed to the momentum toward formal recognition. As of today, 58 countries have signed the Treaty and 10 have ratified it. Several were expected to deposit their instruments of ratification at the High-Level Meeting on Disarmament that had

been scheduled for last May in New York. A good forthcoming occasion for this action is the celebration of the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, on September 26.

In 2009 former U.N. Secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon proposed a five-point plan for nuclear disarmament. Secretary-General António Guterres has just unveiled his new agenda, entitled “Securing Our Common Future”. In a tone reminiscent of the 1955 Russell-Einstein Manifesto, he warned that “the existence of nuclear weapons poses a continuing threat to the world”. All States should heed such calls for action.

An unfortunate consequence of the state of insecurity prevailing in the world is the growing and disquieting trend toward the erosion of respect for universal legal norms, starting with the fundamental standards of international behavior contained in the UN Charter, which should govern relations among sovereign states. The erosion of confidence in the multilateral arms control and disarmament framework in fact explains, at least in part, increased efforts to produce new nuclear weapons systems.

The age-old principle of *pact sunt servanda* (commitments are meant to be respected) is being increasingly questioned. It is a longstanding principle that treaties celebrated between sovereign States are the supreme law of the land, and thus take precedence over internal legislation. Nevertheless, we have recently heard statements by officials of the highest level that lead to the conclusion that their national interest is somehow placed above the interest of humankind as translated in solemn bilateral or multilateral agreements. Enlightened world leaders know that the supreme interests of their countries involve also the aspirations of mankind as a whole. No nation, particularly those with large resources and wealth, can devote itself to the satisfaction of its national objectives without taking into account the legitimate needs and yearnings of humanity, of which their own populations are an indissoluble part.

Thank you.