



United States Mission to the OSCE

Opening Session

As prepared for delivery by Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Last year, I delivered an intervention at this conference asking participating States to consider what we as an international community could do to address the security challenges facing Europe today. Since that time, in addition to the usual work of this Organization, we have been engaged in a Structured Dialogue on security issues, with the goal of having a substantive, productive exchange on the full range of current security concerns affecting Europe today. The list of concerns raised to date, particularly in discussions on threat perceptions, has been daunting in its scope. The threat to our societies from terrorism and the forces of violent extremism was a theme cited by nearly all the nations represented here. Other complex transnational issues – the impact of migration flows on social and economic stability; the trade in illegal weapons and other forms of trafficking, including human trafficking – have also figured on that large agenda for dialogue.

At this conference we have an opportunity to discuss some of the core political military issues that have been raised under the rubric of threat perceptions. These are hard issues, and they are familiar. The fact of active conflict and ongoing bloodshed in Europe today – in Ukraine and the Caucasus – is more than a blot on the copybook of international diplomacy. It is a human tragedy. The war in Ukraine was not inevitable. The downturn in relations in Europe that flowed from the events in Ukraine has yielded a transformation in the European security environment that none of us wanted to witness again in our lifetimes. We have less confidence in the political and military intentions of our neighbors, less transparency about military activities, and many, many more incidents where the most lethal military organizations on earth are at risk of the kind of misunderstanding that can yield very serious consequences.

This is not where we want to be. The question is, what can the OSCE do to help us address some of the issues that have changed our world?

It is clear that even hard work by the dedicated diplomats in this room cannot address problems at the core of the security challenges we face. The strength of the OSCE lies in the values and principles that all 57 participating States around this table have committed themselves to respect and support. If the nations in this room choose to continue to violate those principles and commitments, no palliative will succeed. Only a change in behavior by participating States acting in bad faith can truly improve the security situation to the level our citizens deserve. Nonetheless, here in Vienna our job is to make an attempt to start to address some of those sources of conflict and tension. OSCE – with all its weaknesses, but with the strength that is its inclusive membership – is that rare institution, a place where nations can

decide to have a dialogue on the security issues that worry them most, and try to identify ways ahead. It is an honor to be here.

We face a number of severe challenges to European security that will require the continued, focused attention of this organization, many of which will be discussed in the coming days. Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine and its attempted annexation of Crimea continue, over three years later; the protracted conflicts in Europe endure, with active conflict in Nagorno Karabakh; actions by the members of violent extremist groups have struck a number of our countries; lack of transparency about large-scale military exercises has heightened tensions and reduced confidence.

There is no easy solution to these complex problems. However, what is clear is that all of these issues would be improved through the involved actors upholding international norms and principles. The rules-based international system that we have long relied upon to achieve these aims is being undermined by the unilateral decisions of individual participating States, as well as by the actions of members of violent extremist groups.

The United States firmly supports the implementation of these commitments and we reject any claims that shortcomings in our current European security architecture are the problem. Rather, some OSCE participating States have implemented policies that are inconsistent with the principles and commitments in the Helsinki Final Act that provide the foundation for this Organization. We need the political will to not only stand by these shared principles and commitments, but also to hold participating States accountable for their actions when they violate these norms.

I would be remiss if I failed to highlight the clearest example of what happens when states fail to uphold their commitments – the conflict in Ukraine. It is long past time for Russia and the so-called “separatists” it arms, trains, leads and fights alongside to implement fully the Minsk agreements, including a comprehensive ceasefire, unimpeded access for the SMM, withdrawal of its forces, and the return to Ukrainian control over its international border with Russia. In the immediate term, we need to ensure the brave men and women of the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine have the highest levels of security possible – the death of an American member of the SMM earlier this year crystalizes the urgency.

The horrifying actions of extremists throughout the OSCE area have underscored the urgency of making progress on the OSCE’s approaches to counterterrorism and countering violent extremism. We also need to do more to protect human rights, oppose bigotry, advance gender equality, and build inclusive civil societies that respect a free press and freedom of expression. Participating States must acknowledge when they are failing to uphold their OSCE commitments, and strive to do better. They need to hold each other to account for these shared commitments, and maintain this Organization’s ability to assist its participating States with their full implementation.

It’s obvious that not all – or even most – of the challenges we face in Europe today are solvable through tools like arms control. Arms control cannot substitute for the decision of a state to uphold its commitments. That being said, among the many tools at our disposal are confidence- and security-building measures; improved implementation can help to rebuild military transparency in Europe through increased information-sharing. We need to work together to update the Vienna Document to address gaps and redress the decline in military

transparency that began a decade ago, when Russia suspended implementation of the CFE Treaty, and which have been precipitate in the last five years. Later in this conference we will discuss the contribution of arms control to European security.

We will all meet again, here in Vienna, in December, where we will account for the work of this organization on key areas this year and for the upcoming year. We should make it our goals to be able to demonstrate progress – if not consensus on a decision – on areas of concern.

We can take steps to ensure the security and full access of our OSCE missions in regions of conflict – particularly the SMM, whose members face imminent danger, daily.

We can work to modernize and improve implementation of the Vienna Document and begin to rebuild military transparency in Europe.

We can develop strategies to help OSCE participating States address the challenge of violent extremism, while upholding human rights and maintaining the values that underpin democratic societies.

We can work to improve people-to-people ties in areas of protracted conflict.

We thank the Austrian Chairmanship for its leadership and we look forward to a constructive exchange to reaffirm our values and commitments to overcome shared security challenges.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.