



United States Mission to the OSCE

Annual Security Review Conference

Special Session: The Structured Dialogue Proposals to Promote Transparency and Mitigate Threat Perceptions During the COVID-19 Crisis

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Vienna, June 24, 2020

Thank you Chair.

Like many other participating States, the United States has taken steps during the COVID-19 pandemic to cancel or scale back our military activities, primarily for health and safety reasons, but also to exercise practical restraint. This is not the time, during a global health crisis, for any participating State to exploit or exacerbate the situation including through the spreading of disinformation or for hybrid actions for which ambiguity and difficulty of attribution are key to the action's very effectiveness. It is revealing that the participating States most inclined to partake of these actions are the very ones who oppose talking about them in this forum.

We share the view expressed by other participating States in this and other sessions that it is important in the Structured Dialogue to continue to discuss the threats posed to security in the OSCE region by the panoply of hybrid activities, initiated in particular by one government at this table.

In our view, the best way to avoid misperceptions is also the simplest and least "technological." In a word: transparency. We have been fully transparent about our military activities and have kept communication channels open through notifications and other means with those who might be concerned about them.

For example, for Exercise DEFENDER–Europe 2020, the United States and its Allies have published 21 notifications, including 11 since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, to keep participating States informed as the situation changed and military planning evolved in response. On March 13, troop and cargo movement from the United States into the zone of application stopped, even after some ships and planes were fully loaded; indeed, some ships were already underway and turned around in the mid-Atlantic. Of the 20,000 troops and 20,000 pieces of equipment scheduled to deploy, only 6,000 troops and 3,000 pieces of equipment had arrived in Europe from the United States prior to the pandemic.

In addition to notifications, U.S. Army Europe maintains social media platforms and a website (www.eur.army.mil/DEFENDEREUROPE) specifically dedicated to keeping the public well informed on the exercises, publishing press releases and sharing photos, videos, and instructive infographics. An example of the creative use of technology was the “live stream” of the river-crossing portion of the exercise on social media platforms. We endeavored to be as transparent as possible in real time.

We would like to highlight that the Vienna Document entitles participating States to request and obtain clarification from any other participating State concerning the application of an agreed confidence- and security- building measure. We appreciate that Belarus requested clarification on Exercise DEFENDER-Europe 2020. The United States promptly responded to this request for clarification with comprehensive answers to Belarus' questions. We thank Belarus for engaging in constructive and clarifying dialogue.

Unfortunately, this was not quite the case when the United States and several other participating States requested clarification from the Russian Federation regarding the no-notice, snap exercise Russia conducted at the end of March, an exercise in which press reports suggested up to 80,000 troops participated. While we recognize the benefit of conducting counter-pandemic training, Russia unfortunately provided only a generic response to our request for clarification, which lacked any reasonable level of detail regarding the forces involved and activities taking place within the zone of application. We regret this missed opportunity for more transparency, particularly during a period of increased concern related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing pause in verification activities.

Many states have paused verification activities during the pandemic in order to protect their verification teams, their families, and the broader population. This has encouraged us to brainstorm, think creatively, and consider technological capabilities that might be able to fill the gap safely.

Consistent with social distancing guidelines, we believe there may be value in exploring virtual or video-teleconference capabilities to facilitate Vienna Document briefings at times such as these when it is not advisable for numerous inspectors, escorts, and military representatives to gather in close proximity.

We have also seriously explored the feasibility of using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as tools to mitigate risks associated with COVID-19 during verification activities. However, we soon discovered that although UAVs might solve some human contact problems, the numerous air space, security, and safety concerns and challenges associated with the use of UAVs for verification made this option unrealistic.

To conclude, the United States calls on participating States to exercise restraint as much as possible in moving forward towards a resumption of verification activities. This pandemic has affected and will continue to affect participating States in different ways and to different extents. It is completely understandable that, while some may be ready to resume activities, others may not. We all need to evaluate our own risk tolerance, determine

mitigation measures, and decide how to communicate plans to implement these measures. This open and transparent communication with partners will go a long way to reassure participating States that we have no untoward intentions, which is critical to building confidence and trust in these difficult times.

What would not be helpful right now is continued exploitation of the pandemic to spread fake narratives and blatant disinformation. This disinformation has included, for example, false accusations that troops involved in scaled back DEFENDER 2020 activities were spreading the coronavirus, as we heard during the Structured Dialogue session earlier this month. We call on any engaged parties to stop these forms of destabilizing activities.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.