

Intervention at the conference “Nuclear Disarmament: Opportunities for Peace and Work for Europe and the World”

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First of all, let me thank the organisers for inviting COMECE to this important and timely conference.

I would like to offer some observations as someone who works for the Catholic Church – the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union – here in Brussels and is in regular dialogue with European institutions.

With the on-going unjust and inhumane Russian military aggression against Ukraine launched on 24 February last and its wider implications for peace in Europe and globally, the world seems to have re-entered a new Cold War dynamic, which, however, is different from the one of the previous century. Due to lacking stabilising moments, the escalating nuclear rhetoric we are currently witnessing is accompanied by a high degree of unpredictability. The “nuclear violence” manifesting itself through a language of threats seems to ignore the distinction between conventional and nuclear warfare, thus leaving all scenarios open, even that of an annihilating nuclear response to defensive actions of a conventional nature. Nuclear weapons in the current geopolitical context cannot be regarded anymore as instruments ensuring “a certain balance of power” through a “balance of terror”. This renders them even more dangerous than during the “old” Cold War era.

Moreover, eroding respect for the principles of international law and for bi- and multilateral agreements has greatly undermined any trust within the international community. Some global actors tend to regard the respect for international law and its principles as a form of weakness. The risk is that such actors would only understand the language of violence. How should members of the international community that are in favour of a rules-based global order, respond? With threats and actions fueling further escalation, or with steps opening up new ways of dialogue and constructive engagement, gradually building up mutual trust, a precondition for a stable and predictable international order? Which role could and should the European Union play in this respect?

When we look at Europe, and the European Union in particular, the picture we see with regard to nuclear weapons is quite complex: following the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU, France is now the only remaining nuclear weapon state in the European Union. In his speech on the Defence and Deterrence Strategy¹ given two years ago, the French President reaffirmed that “*nuclear deterrence remains, as a last resort, the key to [French] security*”, and he offered European partners the perspective of a strategic dialogue on the potential role of French deterrence in European security. While acknowledging that “*there is a long-standing ethical debate about nuclear weapons, [...] to which Pope Francis [...] contributed during his visit to Hiroshima*”, President Macron underlined the commitment of his country to *gradual and multilateral* disarmament based on Art VI of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

¹ <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>

On the other side of the spectrum, there are European countries, such as Austria and Ireland, that have been important driving forces behind the so-called “*humanitarian pledge*”, that was instrumental in mobilising global efforts leading to the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) which entered into force and has become part of the international legal framework on disarmament last year. Austria, Ireland and Malta are so far the only three Member States of the European Union that have signed and ratified the TPNW, whereas two more EU Member States² have voted in favour of this Treaty but have not yet become states parties. On a side note, I may also add that the Holy See was among the first to sign and ratify the TPNW and it has shown leadership in promoting the universalisation of this Treaty as a vital part of the global nuclear disarmament architecture, in complementarity with other important Treaties, notably the NPT and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)³. To complete this European mosaic, it should be noted that 21 EU Member States are also NATO allies and as such covered by “extended nuclear deterrence”, while four⁴ of them are directly hosting US nuclear weapons on their territory.

Those familiar with European politics know that such a colourful picture is not rare in the European context. It is in the European Union’s DNA to be in constant search for unity in diversity, balancing diverging economic interests, geographical perspectives and historical experiences in view of the common good. In principle, questions of security and defence are mainly national prerogatives to be addressed primarily by EU Member States, but European institutions can provide an important space for coordinating common positions and approaches.

In this respect, a common EU Strategy against Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction⁵ was adopted in 2003, declaring also EU’s engagement for the universalisation of the global non-proliferation and disarmament architecture. Together with subsequent Council conclusions⁶ it provides the basis for financial assistance, political declarations and diplomatic action of the European Union in global fora. Despite an annual progress report, this EU Strategy would today, however, require a review and an upgrade, in order to reflect the recent geopolitical developments as well as technological advances and evolutions in the international legal order.

As an illustration of certain shortcomings in EU’s current approach to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament I may refer to the recent conclusions of the Council of the European Union on the 10th NPT Review Conference⁷. While the Council mentions a number of commendable proposals for the way forward in nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament efforts, such as the entry into force of the CTBT, the start of negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty or the strategic risk reduction and the establishment of nuclear weapons free zones, the Council conclusions contain no reference to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Even though there may be different approaches among the Member States and for some it may be politically difficult to join the TPNW at this moment, it would be an

² Cyprus and Sweden.

³ Cf. <https://holyseemission.org/contents//statements/5daf5f814a376.php> .

⁴ Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands.

⁵ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/st_15708_2003_init_en.pdf .

⁶ Notably the Council conclusions on new lines for action by the European Union in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems (2008), and others, cf. <https://www.nonproliferation.eu/hcoc/eu-documents/> .

⁷ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13243-2021-INIT/en/pdf> .

important step forward and a courageous sign of leadership, if the EU as such would acknowledge the existence of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, in its complementarity with the NPT and other important legal instruments of the global arms control architecture.

Nevertheless, the European Union can also demonstrate some significant achievements thanks to its strong commitment to multilateralism. A key element in EU's recent disarmament diplomacy efforts is certainly the coordination of negotiations leading to the Iran nuclear agreement (the so-called JCPOA⁸) which is now in need of new impulses to be fully and effectively implemented by all stakeholders so that it can fulfil hopes for being an instrument for greater regional stability and peace. Intensive negotiations seem to be entering into their final stage and the EU continues to play a crucial role in their coordination.

The European Union has also repeatedly expressed concerns over the erosion of arms control agreements between the United States and the Russian Federation, and in view of the security implications for Europe, the EU called for preserving, further strengthening and possibly extending the pertinent arms control and disarmament architecture⁹. The renewal of the new START Treaty was a welcome step in this respect¹⁰, however, the EU encouraged further progress in the strategic dialogue on additional reductions to nuclear arsenals as well as on confidence-building, transparency and verification procedures, with possible contributions from other nuclear weapon States¹¹. Moreover, the European Parliament has recently called on the EU to play a constructive role in reinforcing the global arms control architecture¹², including the initiation of international talks on a multilateral ballistic missile treaty¹³.

Indeed, in a fragile geopolitical environment marked by eroding trust in multilateral legal frameworks and practices, Europe's strength can be to use its own experience and a broad range of its policy tools to contribute to a renewal of multilateralism and a rules-based international order. This, however, is also very much linked to the question of the coherence and consistency of the international legal framework. In this respect, the EU may pose the question: *Is it coherent with international commitments to the Sustainable Development Agenda or the Paris Climate Agreement, to uphold concepts and weapons whose intentional or accidental detonation would have devastating humanitarian and ecological consequences? Is it not a stark contradiction of the international system to possess such weapons whose maintenance and modernisation diverts enormous amounts of funds from agendas promoting human development and ecology?* Article 26 of the UN Charter contains very clear indications in this regard: the maintenance of international peace and security shall be promoted “with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources”. An appeal that in today's context of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and its wide-ranging consequences becomes more urgent than ever.

⁸ Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/110588/jcpoa-negotiators-resume-talks-vienna-tuesday_en .

⁹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13243-2021-INIT/en/pdf> .

¹⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/02/03/new-start-extension-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union/> .

¹¹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13243-2021-INIT/en/pdf> .

¹² https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0504_EN.html .

¹³ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0281_EN.html

Many say that nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament cannot and should not be separated from broader considerations on security and peace. The European Union has recently adopted a “Strategic Compass”¹⁴ for its security and defence policy. This process aimed at providing a joint European strategic reflection on the major security *threats*, on the long-term strategic *goals* and on adequate *means* to address the threats in line with the goals. Several voices, including the Bishops of COMECE, have been advocating¹⁵ in this regard that these strategic objectives should be oriented towards human security and sustainable peace. This would imply much more than protection of national or economic interests. It would imply a truly interconnected approach, effectively linking security and defence policies and actors with those of diplomacy, development cooperation, human rights, international trade, climate action, energy, migration and other relevant fields. While the Strategic Compass introduces a number of significant initiatives, such as a regular assessment of threats to European security, and it makes the case for a stronger European cooperation and for international partnerships, one may have the impression that it falls short of providing a comprehensive definition of peace. There are already some voices that encourage the EU to embed the Strategic Compass in a broader EU strategic document on the promotion of *peace*. It is widely accepted that security is essential for peace because it shall protect human dignity. However, peace is more than security, it is more than the absence of war and violence, since it requires coherent efforts aimed at promoting *integral human development, justice, human rights and the care of the environment*¹⁶. A useful tool that could form the basis of such an *integral EU Peace Strategy* could be an *EU Peace & Human Security Index* inspired by a pertinent initiative at the African Union¹⁷.

In the Strategic Compass, the EU commendably also pledges to “*uphold, support and further advance the disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control framework*”. As outlined before, it would, however, be desirable if the EU and its Member States could step up their commitment in this regard and become an engine of multilateral non-proliferation and disarmament efforts, especially in view of the upcoming two important international Conferences on the TPNW and the NPT. In this context, the EU may ask the question: *Does the possession of nuclear weapons (and other mass destruction technologies) in today’s world actually contribute to the goal of enhancing the security of persons, families and communities, or does it rather pose a threat by leading to further escalation? Are there not more adequate and more cost-efficient alternatives to address the actual threats to human security and to human development?*

In order to conclude, let me briefly refer to some possible actions that could be taken from a European perspective in order to renew processes of *de-escalation, stabilisation, dialogue and constructive cooperation* in view of re-building the necessary *trust* within the international community in support of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

Internally, the institutions of the European Union need to provide spaces for a participatory dialogue in view of developing a *shared European strategic culture of peace*. This process should not only involve Member States but also other stakeholders, including academia, the private sector as well as civil society and religious actors. If the European Union and its

¹⁴ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

¹⁵ https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/01/pdf_20170619.pdf.

¹⁶ Cf. COMECE, *Whose Security, Whose Defence?* (2017), <https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/04/20170619-COMECE-Contribution-future-European-Defence.pdf>.

¹⁷ <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/hsprogramme/ahsi/>.

Member States were to embrace a genuine European culture of peace, with human security and sustainable peace at its heart, it would become evident that nuclear weapons would have no place in it. As the question of nuclear weapons is not only of military nature, but it also has a strong political dimension, the European Parliament representing the voice of more than 440 million European citizens could articulate a clear and bold political vision and ambition in this respect, and encourage the necessary political will of Member States to contribute more resolutely to nuclear disarmament efforts in Europe and internationally.

At the global level, the EU's strength could lie in reinvigorating multilateral efforts and fostering regional and international partnerships in favour of nuclear disarmament. In the spirit of Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli tutti*¹⁸, the European Union could build upon its own experience in strengthening mutual trust and seeking a common ground, and contribute to a transformation of international relations into a true global community, based on fraternity and an ethic of solidarity and cooperation. The EU is in a unique position to use its broad range of policy instruments - from diplomacy over to trade, development, climate or energy - to open up new ways of dialogue and constructive cooperation also with actors that seem to show little willingness to engage in nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.

This may also help to break the "enemy" logic or the great power competition dynamic that is unfortunately regaining ground in international relations. Especially in view of the upcoming First Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW and the 10th NPT Review Conference, it would be important to avoid any antagonistic tendencies and to focus on common and complementary approaches. Even if for some States it may be politically difficult to join the TPNW at this moment, they could still participate in the First Meeting of States Parties as observers and seek constructive ways of engagement with it, for example by contributing through expertise or financially to the work on victims' assistance (Art 6 TPNW) or environmental remediation (Art 7 TPNW).

As Pope Francis recently implied, at the present moment in history, the world seems to be at a crossroads: "*Shall we put an end to the human race, or shall mankind renounce war? (Russell-Einstein Manifesto, 9 July 1955)*"¹⁹. "*It has never been clearer that, for peace to flourish, all people need to lay down the weapons of war, and especially the most powerful and destructive of weapons: nuclear arms that can cripple and destroy whole cities, whole countries*".²⁰

The current challenging times – as is often said – therefore also present an invitation to renew processes of multilateral and multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation, and to re-think perspectives and postures – like the nuclear deterrence doctrine – that should not have a place in the 21st century. The European Union can and should play an active part in creating conditions for a more peaceful world, and nuclear disarmament should be an integral part of this process.

Thank you for your attention.

Marek Misak

¹⁸ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html .

¹⁹ Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi Easter Message, 17 April 2022.

²⁰ Pope Francis, Letter to the to the governor of Hiroshima, Hidehiko Yuzaki, 6 August 2020.