Although my remarks today will be brief, I do wish to thank the International Institute for Strategic Studies for inviting me to speak and to commend the European Union for recognizing the importance of strengthening the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. This conference provides an excellent opportunity to reflect upon where the world stands with respect to the goals of that regime, as well as its scope and limitations.

I am sure many of you have heard the words often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, who—when asked what he thought about western civilization—responded, “it would be a good idea.”

I have very much the same view about the global nuclear disarmament regime. Can we say that it really exists? Let’s consider the evidence, or more precisely, the lack of it.

Not one nuclear weapon has actually been eliminated by a treaty commitment—we have witnessed instead only the voluntary retirement of certain obsolete weapons, with some caps on various deployments. And no nuclear disarmament negotiations have been underway in the 45-year history of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, despite its obligation to undertake them.

In 1996, an International Court of Justice’s Advisory Opinion concluded unanimously that there is an obligation to undertake such negotiations in good faith and to bring them to a conclusion. Yet many states have ignored this judgment. Since 1997, an annual General Assembly resolution following up on this Advisory Opinion receives about 50 votes in opposition or in abstention, largely from NATO countries. I doubt the vote this year will be any different—though it’s worth noting that last year’s vote of 135 in favour was the highest ever.

As for the UN General Assembly, it identified nuclear disarmament as a goal in its first resolution adopted in 1946, but many still view it as only a distant goal or utopian dream.

Meanwhile, institutions of the UN disarmament machinery—the Disarmament Commission, the General Assembly’s First Committee, and the Conference on Disarmament—remain deeply divided on nuclear disarmament issues.

And when it comes to infrastructure, the real deficiency is not international but domestic. Where are the national disarmament agencies, legislation, regulations, plans, timetables, budgets and institutional support structures?

I therefore think that the case is rather dubious that there is something that deserves to be called the global nuclear disarmament regime. Is the same true with respect to a global nuclear non-proliferation regime? The difference is obvious.

Concerning the latter, we have a treaty with close to universal membership and a regular review process. We have a global system to safeguard peaceful uses of nuclear materials. Security Council Resolution 1540 in 2004 established an obligation for states to have legislation to prohibit the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or their acquisition by non-state actors. The Security Council has also repeatedly declared the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—but not nuclear weapons per se—to be a threat to international peace and security.
So in practice, what we all call “the international non-proliferation and disarmament regime” consists of a system of institutions and norms to prevent the geographical spread of nuclear weapons, coupled with a promise to pursue the elimination of such weapons at some uncertain but distant time—if ever—subject to preconditions. I view this less as a nuclear disarmament regime than as what might be called a Partial Nuclear Arms Control Regime. It consists of negotiated ceilings on deployments of strategic nuclear weapons of two countries, with no international verification, and no participation by the other three recognized nuclear-weapons States, China, France, and the United Kingdom, or the non-NPT states. This is not global, this is not disarmament, and this is not a regime.

But hasn’t there been progress in nuclear disarmament, even if it lacks a regime? After all, the size of the global nuclear weapons stockpile has dropped from over 70,000 during the Cold War to around 17,000 today, a figure reflecting reductions both in warheads and delivery systems. We’ve seen some nuclear test sites closed, along with some plants for producing fissile material for weapons. Some possessor states have declared that they have eliminated entire classes of nuclear weapons. Even if unverified, these actions deserve to be welcomed.

Yet two questions arise: are such steps sufficient to achieve disarmament, and are these actually steps in the right direction? Robust nuclear-weapon modernization programmes, for example, raise legitimate questions over whether these steps are heading toward global zero, or instead to a permanently nuclear-armed world. Advocates of the “step-by-step” approach also have a long tradition of saying that it is always premature to address disarmament directly—yet it never seems to be too soon to tighten non-proliferation controls. This leads us to the old double standard of absolute preconditions for nuclear disarmament, coupled with demands for unconditional adherence to non-proliferation.

In light of these observations, my recipe for strengthening this regime is not surprising. The greatest need in strengthening this regime is to strengthen the disarmament component of this regime. Alternative approaches that seek just to tighten non-proliferation controls are unsustainable. Such an approach would erode what is left of the legitimacy of the regime.

Disarmament is not merely the caboose – the last car on the great freight train of non-proliferation. If anything, progress on disarmament has the potential to be the locomotive for the growth and effectiveness of the regime. It certainly is needed in strengthening international peace and security, in saving vast human and financial resources, and in opening up new opportunities for social and economic development.

The next phase of the life cycle of nuclear weapons must be an era of continued decline leading to elimination, rather than a nuclear weapons renaissance fuelled by modernization and endlessly growing claims of new foreign threats. The world needs some reassurance that there is a nuclear disarmament regime, one that actually operates to constrain the behaviour of states and that helps in setting their common priorities. More than any other option, this will help to strengthen common security and restore hopes for a safer and more prosperous world.

As voiced this year at the Oslo conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and in two special nuclear disarmament arenas at the UN—namely, the Open-Ended
Working Group and most recently the High Level Meeting on nuclear disarmament—there are lots of worthy ideas for moving this agenda forward.

Among these must be deeper and irreversible cuts in both deployed and non-deployed nuclear weapons, and both in tactical and in nuclear weapons. The nuclear-weapon states must improve the transparency of their arsenals (including weapons, fissile material, and delivery systems) and the steps they are taking to implement their disarmament commitments. All states with nuclear weapons should be engaged in this disarmament process. They must explore the means to maintain international peace and security without either nuclear deterrence or nuclear weapons. The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty must enter into force. The fissile material from dismantled weapons must be internationally verified—and a fissile material treaty must be negotiated, which would hardly be effective if stocks were not included. We also need to see some real progress in establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. This is much more than just a regional issue.

And at some point, the historical accident linking possession of nuclear weapons with permanent membership in the UN Security Council must be reversed. If non-proliferation is to have any chance of success, possession should be a stigma, not a status symbol. I would like to see the day when a nuclear-weapon-free Europe is represented on the Council. Is this unthinkable? I don’t think so—let’s assume it is possible and get to work in achieving it.

These initiatives would represent a good beginning in strengthening the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. The point of this regime must not be to legitimize a distribution of power between the nuclear have’s and have not’s. It must instead be to de-legitimize nuclear weapons. This might well be the last opportunity to strengthen the norm of non-proliferation. This is not a chance the world community can afford to miss.

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