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Speech by Federal Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the Conference „2020. Capturing Technology. Rethinking Arms Control“

06. November 2020

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Colleagues,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Arms control and the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic have something in common: They only work when everybody respects certain rules and limitations.

That is why I am speaking to you today from my home. I recently had contact with an infected person – and COVID-19 regulations require that I self-quarantine. But I did not want to miss this important conference.

Ladies and gentlemen,

“War is a chameleon”, the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously stated. It constantly adapts to changing circumstances. And due to political, social and technological change, Clausewitz wrote, “every age has its own kind of war”.

The way we think about war in our age has transformed considerably over the last decade. In a world of disruption, wars have become hybrid, harder to predict and more difficult to contain. The chameleon has changed its colours.

Two factors are driving this transformation:

First, geopolitical and military rivalry between states is on the rise.

Great power competition has returned, which could lead to the biggest global arms race since the Cold War.

Moreover, we see increasing regional military competition, for example in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

Such developments are undermining trust, damaging multilateral cooperation and destabilising the international order.

They have also damaged the post-Cold War arms control architecture – just think of the end of the INF Treaty or the dire state of conventional arms control in Europe.

The second big driver of change are new technologies – the topic of our conference today.

Autonomous weapon systems have created the fear of “killer robots” that attack targets without human control.

Cyber attacks on critical infrastructure could paralyse entire countries. And while attribution remains difficult, retaliation could easily provoke unintended conflicts.

And new missile technologies – particularly hypersonic missiles – have reduced reaction times to close to zero. In a crisis, this could lead to grave miscalculations – with severe consequences for all of us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As political leaders, we have a duty to make sure that this does not happen.

If war is an ever-changing chameleon – then we need to look at arms control as a chameleon, too. We need to preserve it, strengthen it – and adapt it to our new age.

Germany therefore welcomes the recent negotiations between the United States and Russia regarding the extension of New START. This positive dynamic needs to continue also after the US elections. The treaty is not just a bilateral issue – it is a guarantor of global security.

I call on Washington and Moscow to finally take the steps that are necessary to extend New START before it expires in less than four months.

An extension of New START could also pave the way for a broader arms control architecture that ensures stability and peace in the twenty-first century – by further reducing nuclear warheads, including non-strategic ones. Germany stands ready to support such an effort.

This discussion also needs to involve China. As a major nuclear and military power, Beijing must engage more strongly in arms control, transparency and risk reduction.

The review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty next year offers a platform to advance nuclear disarmament. Bold steps by the P5 are needed. And we hope that after the US elections, the United States will again take on its role as a strong proponent of the NPT and nuclear disarmament. We have to get closer to our goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

To reach this goal, and for everyone's security, we have to put an end to regional proliferation crises:

Together with the EU and our French and British colleagues, we have worked hard towards preserving the nuclear agreement with Iran over the last difficult years. Iran has to stop all violations of the JCPoA. We strongly encourage Iran and the new US administration to restart diplomacy. This could lead to a broader dialogue on regional security and the prevention of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

We also need complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programme. We support negotiations with North Korea, while upholding and strengthening sanctions – which are key to bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In these efforts for global arms control and non-proliferation, Europe can and must play an important role. And the presence of four of my European colleagues at this conference underlines that we are willing to do so.

We stand ready to work with all of you on new norms to strengthen multilateral arms control. In fact, you are already part of this effort:

After our first conference on new technologies last year, this year's hybrid conference is bringing together 1000 experts from around the world.

The Missile Dialogue Initiative, which we also launched last year, has become a forum for decision-makers and experts to address the challenges to peace and security in our times. In the United Nations, we have contributed to an agreement on a first set of guiding principles to ensure human accountability for the use of autonomous weapons. And with our European partners, we have established an EU cyber sanctions regime – to hold accountable those who attack our citizens, our industries or our democracies.

But we must not stop there. My colleagues from the Czech Republic, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and I are advocating a stronger role of the European Union in arms control. With their military capacities, industrial potential and regulatory experience, the EU and its member states can shape norms and standards for the military use of new technologies. As a first step, we suggest a strategic process within the European Union on the responsible military use of new technologies. Such a process could assess how EU policies in this area can contribute to security in a new technological age. We want to build a common European understanding of future conflict. And we are convinced that Europe must lead by example, with a focus on the values that we share with partners around the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Carl von Clausewitz, whom I mentioned earlier, spent all of his life thinking about war. However, he did not die on a battlefield. In fact, he died in a cholera pandemic that spread through Europe in the early 1830s. No theory of war, no weapon and no army could have protected him from that.

Today, as the coronavirus pandemic is threatening us all, we should keep that in mind. Because as I said at the beginning: the fight against COVID-19 and arms control – they both require respect for rules, multilateral cooperation and mutual trust. Only by working together can we control the ever-changing “chameleon” called war – and thus preserve peace.

Thank you!

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