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Ladies and gentlemen, students, distinguished guests,

Thank you for joining us today. It is a privilege to be here among the scholars of one of America's great universities. Looking out at the future political leaders and diplomats in the audience, I can't help but feel a bit nostalgic, especially considering the topic that we are gathered here to discuss: the upcoming 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's founding document.

I was about your age when this document was signed in August 1975 as part of détente efforts between East and West and I remember feeling at the time what great promise it held for the world as a whole. Within the context of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, it is difficult to overstate the historical significance of these Accords.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the Helsinki agreement did not take place in a vacuum, but was the culmination of a series of summits and treaties that had begun in earnest following the Cuban Missile Crisis, which had very nearly led to a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

A series of confidence- and security-building measures began in the early 1960s with the Partial Test Ban Treaty signed in 1963 and later in the decade, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Heading into the 1970s, East and West agreed on the need for further limits leading to the signing of the SALT I treaty in 1972, as well as the Biological Weapons Convention and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Talks on SALT II also began in 1972.

Then, in 1975, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe met and produced the Helsinki Accords, a wide ranging series of agreements on economic, political, and human rights issues.

We knew at the time what a groundbreaking agreement this was, with its articulation of a security concept that was both innovative and comprehensive. In an era in which security was defined solely in relation to the external security of states, the agreement tied politico-military security to the economic-environmental dimension and the human dimension. This was an unprecedented departure given that, amidst sustained militarized hostility between competing blocs, human rights and fundamental freedoms had not hitherto been addressed as genuine security issues.

By pledging to remove barriers to economic and scientific exchanges, co-operation was enabled in a very real and pragmatic way. The Helsinki Final Act established modes of collaboration for commercial exchanges and industrial development, co-operation in higher education, student exchanges and joint scientific research projects were also stipulated. And today, in this increasingly globalized world, where many of you have probably either studied or are planning to study abroad, we can fully see the advantages of this forward-looking decision.

For those who may be pessimistic about the state of international relations today, there is always some inspiration to be found in the fact that even within the deeply polarized context of the Cold War, countries of the communist East and capitalist West – with fundamentally opposing views on politics and economics – were able to agree to such ideals.

As you may know, 2015 marks not only the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, but also the 70th anniversary of the United Nations' Charter. While both of these documents were fundamental milestones for international relations and indeed for human history, it is important to note that although less famous than the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act was in some ways more pioneering. The Final Act, for example, enshrined the inviolability of borders in a way that went beyond the language of the UN Charter. In Helsinki, the participating States agreed that each other's frontiers were inviolable and pledged to refrain "now and in the future from assaulting these frontiers" or to seize "part or all of the territory of any participating State."

Despite these provisions, however, in the four decades since this landmark agreement many of its promises remain unfulfilled. While we have seen many important strides made towards closer international co-operation in certain respects, we have also seen much backsliding and increased tensions. This is true in all three dimensions of security.

What is disappointing is that the understanding that led Cold War adversaries to sign the Helsinki Accords – the realization that their national interests were tied to comprehensive security – seems to be almost forgotten today. Over the past few years we have heard increasing talk about a new Cold War, and of course, the last year has been dominated by the divide over the crisis in Ukraine.

Without getting into the origins of this crisis – and while acknowledging that it is probably not as simple as those on either side make it out to be – what is fairly straightforward is the fact that annexing any part of an OSCE participating State is a violation of the letter and spirit of the Helsinki Final Act.

This, unfortunately, has already taken place in Crimea, and in eastern Ukraine there are ongoing threats to the nation's territorial integrity. So instead of simply celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, we are compelled to seriously take stock of the commitments undertaken four decades ago, and consider in a fundamental way the future of Euro-Atlantic security.

This is exactly what brings us to Washington this week. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, in partnership with the German Marshall Fund, has embarked on a project designed to take stock of the current situation in the OSCE and to develop concrete action lines for the OSCE and its participating States in the coming year, especially in light of the dire challenges faced.

Being that we are here in this academic setting where it is the job of students and professors to think every day about these sorts of questions, I hope to hear more of your perspectives on these matters.

It is a great pleasure being with you today, and I look forward to an open and frank exchange of views.

Thank you very much.