



UK Mission
Geneva

CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

AGENDA ITEM 2: PREVENTION OF NUCLEAR WAR, INCLUDING ALL RELATED MATTERS

STATEMENT BY THE UNITED KINGDOM

H.E. Mr Aidan Liddle, Permanent Representative
Geneva, 18 May 2021

Mr President,

Thank you for organising this week's plenary discussions on agenda item 2, with a particular focus today on nuclear risk reduction. The United Kingdom attaches great importance to this topic. I would also like to thank Dr Wan and Ms Mackby for their presentations.

Before addressing the matter at hand, however, I would like to say a few words on preventing an arms race in outer space – though as Ms Mackby pointed out, the two issues are indeed related. The United Kingdom was pleased to see so many submissions to the UN Secretary-General pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 75/36 on 'Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours'. We believe that there is now a broad international consensus around the need to tackle threats to space systems. By seeking agreement on what might constitute responsible space behaviours by states, we could reduce the chances of misunderstanding, miscalculation and escalation driving an arms race in outer space or leading to conflict.

In our national submission, we set out examples of how responsible behaviours might reduce risks to space systems. The first of these was that Anti-Satellite (ASAT) missile testing could be considered unacceptable in any circumstance; but whenever an ASAT strike leads to the creation of debris that does not decay quickly, that would certainly be unacceptable, and indeed reckless. Should a State carry out such a test, then the United Kingdom would condemn it in the strongest of terms.

We look forward to having the opportunity to discuss this issue in more depth in future plenary meetings in this session.

Mr President,

Turning now to the topic of today's thematic session, the prevention of nuclear war is a core agenda item of this Conference. The first preambular paragraph of the Non-Proliferation Treaty stresses the need to "make every effort to avert the danger" of nuclear war. It is a matter that is clearly of great importance to us all. We therefore welcome the discussion on this topic in the CD today.

In recent years, this question has attracted significant international attention, expressed as 'nuclear' or 'strategic risk reduction'. The UK prefers the latter term, as it focusses more clearly on the prevention of nuclear war. As our recent Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy says, "the UK will continue to work internationally to reduce the risk of nuclear conflict and enhance mutual trust and security. We will champion strategic risk reduction and seek to create dialogue among states possessing nuclear weapons, and between states possessing nuclear weapons and non-nuclear weapon states, to increase understanding and reduce the risk of misinterpretation and miscalculation."

At its core, then, strategic risk reduction is about reducing the risk of a nuclear conflict that neither side intended, expected or deliberately prepared for. This could be due to misinterpretation of an adversary's intentions, capabilities or actions, or through the failure to foresee the consequences of ambiguous actions, military manoeuvres, or the accumulation of irreversible threats in the heat of a crisis. It also recognises the need to lower the risk of conventional conflicts between states possessing nuclear weapons escalating to the threshold where nuclear use is considered. Strategic risk reduction is not a substitute for disarmament, but it is vital activity in its own right and can help to create the environment to enable future disarmament.

We believe there are three elements to strategic risk reduction: first, building trust and confidence between states; second, increasing mutual understanding; and third, developing and using effective crisis management and prevention tools. These are all underpinned by measures to ensure the safety and security of nuclear weapons, which are a key responsibility of states that possess them.

Strategic risk reduction can be promoted through unilateral, bilateral and multilateral measures. All states can play their part. The UK has taken a number of practical measures to support risk reduction, including:

- the de-alerting and de-targeting of the UK nuclear deterrent, which contributes to lengthening the decision-making timeline and reduces the risk of inadvertent escalation;

- engagement in formal risk reduction and incident prevention mechanisms with other states, such as hotlines, military to military channels, and ballistic missile launch notification agreements;
- robust safety and security arrangements within the Defence Nuclear Enterprise, including independent safety and security regulators; and
- a commitment to transparency in our nuclear policy including explaining how and why decisions are made during reviews.

The UK also took the initiative for the establishment of the P5 Process, in 2009. This Process has proved an invaluable forum for increasing mutual comprehension on nuclear matters between the five NPT Nuclear Weapon States, which contributes materially to strategic risk reduction. In the last three years, the Process has worked on further practical risk reduction measures, including the second phase of the Glossary of nuclear-related terms, and exchanges on each state's respective nuclear doctrines. These initiatives speak directly to the need to ensure that the Nuclear Weapon States understand clearly the intention behind each other's doctrines and capabilities, including areas of deliberate ambiguity, to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation. They complement, but cannot substitute for, detailed bilateral strategic stability discussions between states, which are also crucial for preventing nuclear war.

To conclude, Mr President, the UK welcomes any efforts, by states whether they possess nuclear weapons or not, and by civil society, to promote this important work. Groupings such as the Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament initiative and the Stockholm Initiative are good examples. We look forward to deepening our discussions on this issue, both in this Conference, and in the run-up to the Tenth NPT Review Conference.

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