

Ambassador Wood's Remarks to the
Conference on Disarmament Plenary Thematic Debate on Agenda Item 2
Prevention of Nuclear War, Including All Related Matters:
Nuclear Risk Reduction
Tuesday, May 18, 2021, 10:00a.m., 2 hours, Virtual Plenary

Thank you Mr. President.

Risk reduction is an essential and necessary part of advancing disarmament efforts.

As others have said, disarmament is not a simple matter of numbers – it is a process that has to move forward within the very challenging security environment in which we live.

The United States views risk reduction, therefore, in these two lights. First, we need to have credible mechanisms to share information and communicate with other nuclear weapon states and manage potential crises. Second, we have to do the hard work of improving that security environment by building on these risk reduction mechanisms.

Example Mechanisms

The United States works incessantly to increase transparency and predictability to avoid potential miscalculation among nuclear weapons states and other possessor states through strategic dialogues, risk-reduction communication channels, and sharing of best practices related to nuclear weapons safety and security.

Our current security challenges underscore the need to reduce the risks of unintended and miscalculated use of a nuclear weapon or activities that could lead to such use.

The experience of the United States and Russia should not be the only risk reduction template examined, but it is the most robust one. With Russia, the United States has working hotlines, de-confliction working groups, expert-level discussions on nuclear postures and strategic security, and a whole series of confidence-building measures in the form of agreements on missile launches and other potentially dangerous activities, including incidents at sea. Collectively, these agreements and arrangements help to make nuclear conflict a much more remote outcome.

As you all know, the United States worked with Russia to extend the New START Treaty for an additional five years. We believe the most immediate next priority to further reduce nuclear risks is to reinvigorate bilateral dialogues with our strategic competitors. We are therefore pleased that President Biden and President Putin have agreed to begin a dialogue on Strategic Stability.

We wish the story were similar for China. Despite the PRC's dramatic build-up of its nuclear arsenal, unfortunately it continues to resist discussing nuclear risk reduction bilaterally with the United States. For our part, we have and will continue to seek in-depth bilateral exchanges on nuclear doctrines, proposed missile launch notification agreements, and more robust crisis

communication channels. To date, Beijing has not been willing to engage meaningfully or establish expert discussions similar to those we have with Russia. We sincerely hope that will change.

Multilateral dialogues such as Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament and the P5 process, while important, are no substitute for strong and sustained bilateral channels that enable franker, more sensitive exchanges on specific flashpoints, postures, and policies between subject matter experts.

Over all, we believe bilateral discussions can foster the development of specific measures aimed at reducing the risks of misperception and miscalculation between nuclear weapon states. They may also lay the groundwork for formal arms control treaties and progress on nuclear disarmament.

CEND

Moving to the security environment more generally, a full examination of why and how international security has eroded would take far more time than we have today – as would a comprehensive discussion of what to do about it.

I will highlight, however, one of the real efforts the United States launched to make the changes necessary to move disarmament forward.

Many of you participate in this new initiative on Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament – or CEND – and can speak to how it has facilitated genuine dialogue that has become all too rare in more formal venues like the CD.

The United States continues to fully support CEND – and its efforts to identify constructive and actionable proposals for progress on nuclear disarmament. We understand that CEND has no authority over other fora, but see it as a means to come up with new ideas that might eventually be advanced in such fora.

CEND examines different, but interrelated, aspects of the security environment that influence progress on further reductions and disarmament. The subgroups are chaired by a diverse set of countries, and each is supported by non-governmental expert facilitators. These three subgroups address:

- One – Reducing perceived incentives for states to retain, acquire, or increase their holdings of nuclear weapons and increasing incentives to reduce and eliminate nuclear weapons (co-chaired by the Netherlands and Morocco).
- Number two – Mechanisms to bolster nonproliferation efforts and build confidence in and further advance nuclear disarmament (co-chaired by the Republic of Korea and the United States).
- Third – Interim measures to reduce the risks associated with nuclear weapons (co-chaired by Finland and Germany).

Each subgroup is making steady progress in addressing the tasks laid out in their Programs of Work. While the Co-Chairs are still developing the exact form deliverables will take, we believe they will finalize recommendations from each subgroup late in 2022 and release those findings early in 2023, in accordance with the notional timeline discussed at the November 2020 plenary meeting.

Mr. President, some have argued that “risk reduction” efforts are no substitute for nuclear disarmament, but that view sees risk reduction measures as separate from progress on disarmament.

I will end my remarks as I began them, by saying that risk reduction is an essential and necessary component of disarmament efforts and something we should all value as a means to help prevent the potential devastation of nuclear war.

The United States will continue to reach out to ensure we do our part to prevent such a crisis; we appreciate the support from partners in our efforts and would welcome engagement from other nuclear weapon states to this end.

Mr. President, one final point.

Mr. President, Like our British colleagues, the United States strongly supports the development of transparency and confidence measures, as well as norms and “best practices” in outer space and believes the UN First Committee resolution on “Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behavior” provides positive momentum for such an endeavor.

We also echo the United Kingdom’s concerns about the serious danger posed by destructive anti-satellite tests that create long-lived debris, a threat which we discuss in our national submission.

Such an action would be extremely irresponsible and could impact the outer space environment and negatively affect the ability of States to use space for peaceful purposes.

For our part, the United States will continue to work with allies and partners in space to enhance the safety, security, and sustainability of outer space for all countries.

Thank you Mr. President.

