Mr Chair,

Thank you for organising another round of interesting and valuable presentations this morning on space-to-space threats to space systems.

Let me firstly make a few points related to Proximity Operations.

Proximity operations may involve stationing one satellite close to another for a period of time or conducting a fly-by in close proximity, perhaps to inspect that satellite and understand its purpose.

However, if a proximity operation does not follow a predictable pattern, or the capabilities aboard the newly stationed satellite, are unknown, the affected state may worry that it is not peaceful in nature and perceive a threat, increasing the chances of misunderstanding and miscalculation.

Turning to Rendezvous operations, these are integral to active-debris removal and in-orbit servicing.

Such activities offer significant opportunities to improve the space environment and develop new industries. However, as we heard this morning, these capabilities could also be repurposed to attack a satellite.

It is therefore important for building trust that the development and testing of such technologies is done as transparently as possible and that there are clear and agreed procedures for the conduct of such activity.

There is a particular responsibility on those nations with advanced capabilities to cooperate and lead the way in the development of such procedures.

The UK-led RemoveDEBRIS satellite has proven harpooning capabilities for removing space debris. This kind of capability could lead to concern or misunderstanding if we had not been open or transparent on our intentions.
It was interesting to hear this morning about the work being done by industry to develop clear standards and procedures for the conduct of rendezvous and proximity operations for commercial operators. The UK considers that more work is needed on the potential applicability of the solutions being developed in the commercial sector to our discussions on space security.

Mr Chair,

Notwithstanding the dual-use or dual-purpose nature of most space systems, we have heard that some states are developing and deploying on-orbit counter space capabilities. These could in theory encompass a range of destructive and non-destructive capabilities such as jamming, use of directed energy or the use of projectiles or missiles.

It would be standard practice for states to test those systems. But how is a state to determine whether the deployment of an on-orbit capability is a test, or preparation for an attack? What if such testing is conducted near another state’s satellite, or affects the functioning of that satellite?

As we noted yesterday, the risks of misunderstanding, miscalculation and unintended escalation, increase further if the behaviour of one state in space threatens, or creates the perception of a threat, to a strategically important system, such as a satellite that is involved in Ballistic Missile Early Warning and nuclear command and control.

In conclusion Mr Chair,

We heard this morning that it is uniquely difficult to determine the true nature of space-based capabilities; to understand the intent of space-based activities; and to predict the impact of using counter space capabilities.

We heard that military capabilities can be used for civilian activities and that civilian capabilities can be used for hostile purposes. And that military activities in space may not be easily distinguishable from civilian activities.

As we argued in our opening statement, and underlined yesterday, these observations underscore why it is not enough to focus on capability and technology alone, and why measures limited to preventing the placement of weapons in space fail to address threats to space systems in a holistic and effective way. The issues around RPOs and dual purpose systems illustrate this vividly.

We need to start by focusing on the ways states behave when they develop, test and use them. Such behaviours, unlike many characteristics of counter-space technologies and capabilities, can be observed, verified and more readily regulated, and could ultimately be enshrined in legally binding instruments.

Responsible behaviours is not an alternative to but a first step towards legally binding agreements. But we need to take a holistic, inclusive, and iterative approach, beginning with dialogue and promoting common understanding, and exploring the role of voluntary norms as a first step.