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Measures to reduce the breadth of risks associated with nuclear weapons and measures to avoid increasing this risk

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Introduction

1. Nuclear weapons pose unique challenges by virtue of their inherent and associated risks, as well as the magnitude and breadth of the consequences of their detonation. This is in addition to risks related to their delivery systems and directly connected systems, as well as miscalculations and misunderstandings. New technologies, increasingly deployed, have heightened these risks, inter alia, by reducing reaction time in the case of hypersonic missiles and increasing vulnerabilities in the case of cyberhacking. Automation and the integration of artificial intelligence have further heightened the potential for error and fast-tracked escalation. Renewed development and deployment of so-called “small”, or tactical, nuclear weapons has the potential to lower the threshold for use.

2. While data about “near misses” is largely limited to those countries laudably showing more transparency in this area, the incident data available show¹ how close humanity has come to numerous nuclear explosions or even nuclear war. Luck, rather than control procedures, seems to have saved the day on a number of occasions.² During times of tension, the risk of nuclear weapons use, be it by miscalculation, by accident or intentionally, increases. These risks are further exacerbated by thinly veiled threats of nuclear weapon use, as well as considerations of and actual placing of nuclear weapons in other countries. This recent development is not even yet fully reflected in the assessment of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’ famous doomsday

¹ See, inter alia, Chatham House, “Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy” (April 2014), available at www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/199200.

² Ibid., as well as numerous quotations, inter alia Robert S. McNamara “at the end we lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war”, in James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, *The Fog of War: Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), p. 60.



clock standing at an unprecedented 90 seconds to midnight since the beginning of 2023, closer than even at the heights of the Cold War.

3. In the light of the above and the fact that the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons know no borders, reducing risks associated with these weapons, and mitigating factors that could lead to their use, are therefore in the security interest of all States – nuclear-armed and non-nuclear weapon States alike – and their populations. Moreover, it is an urgent responsibility of all states that rely on nuclear weapons in their security doctrines.

4. Logically, it is also vital that risk related to nuclear weapons not be increased by backtracking on existing commitments or practical steps, such as through the upgrading of arsenals, reducing of reaction timelines through forward-stationing or the development of new types of nuclear weapons. Only the total elimination of nuclear weapons can eliminate entirely their inherent risks. Pending the achievement of this ultimate goal of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, risk reduction will remain vital to decreasing the likelihood of nuclear detonations and their catastrophic humanitarian consequences. Risk reduction measures are, thus, not a substitute for the full implementation of the nuclear disarmament obligations and commitments undertaken in the context of the Treaty.

5. Since relevant risks stem from multiple factors, a comprehensive approach is required. We therefore consider it pertinent to consider the detailed discussions and recommendations regarding risk reduction that were elaborated by the 2016 Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, mandated by the General Assembly in its resolution [70/33](#). In paragraph 3 of that resolution, the Open-ended Working Group was tasked, *inter alia* to:

substantively address recommendations on other measures that could contribute to taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations, including but not limited to (a) transparency measures related to the risks associated with existing nuclear weapons; [and] (b) measures to reduce and eliminate the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations.

6. In its report circulated by the Secretary-General in 2016, the Open-ended Working Group compiled a list of priority areas on transparency measures related to the risks associated with existing nuclear weapons and on measures to reduce and eliminate the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations.³ The list thus constitutes an important set of measures to be brought forward as a priority also within the Non-Proliferation Treaty framework, especially since risk reduction has become even more critical owing to the current state of heightened global tensions and lack of progress on nuclear disarmament. The list is without prejudice to further measures being added. The list is also not meant to replace obligations under the Treaty or commitments made during the review process.

7. Drawing extensively on the report of the Open-Ended Working Group, we recommend that the elements below be included in the final document of the tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

³ [A/71/371](#), dated 1 September 2016.

I. Transparency measures related to the risks associated with existing nuclear weapons

8. The principle of transparency,⁴ along with the principles of irreversibility and verifiability, is crucial to the process of nuclear disarmament. Without transparency, nuclear disarmament cannot be credibly verified, nor would States have adequate confidence that nuclear disarmament measures have been accomplished in an irreversible manner. Increased transparency also alleviates mistrust among States and builds confidence and trust at the regional and international levels.

9. Ensuring access to information reported by the States possessing nuclear weapons to the public and to neighbouring and other States is important. In this connection, the establishment of a reporting mechanism within the framework of the United Nations with a view to enhancing accountability and facilitating nuclear disarmament would also be important.⁵

10. The need to protect sensitive information from malicious use by terrorists, criminals and non-State actors needs to be borne in mind, in the context of the public disclosure of information related to nuclear weapon programmes and activities.

11. The following transparency measures should be considered in relation to the risks associated with existing nuclear weapons, including that States possessing nuclear weapons should provide standardized information at regular intervals on, inter alia:

- (a) The number, type (strategic or non-strategic) and status (deployed or non-deployed, and the alert status) of nuclear warheads within their territories as well as those deployed in the territories of other countries;
- (b) The number and the type of delivery vehicles;
- (c) The measures taken to reduce the role and significance of nuclear weapons in military and security concepts, doctrines and policies;
- (d) The measures taken to reduce the risk of unintended, unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons;
- (e) The measures taken to de-alert or reduce the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems;
- (f) The number and type of weapons and delivery systems dismantled and reduced as part of nuclear disarmament efforts;
- (g) The amount of fissile material produced for military purposes: the Working Group considered that baseline information on these issues would also contribute to verification and nuclear disarmament negotiations;
- (h) Information about plans, expenditures and number of facilities related to the modernization and maintenance of nuclear weapons.

⁴ The measures listed in sections I and II were included in the report of the Open-ended Working Group to develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations ([A/71/371](#)).

⁵ States could also use the repository established by the Secretary-General under action 21 of the action plan of the 2010 Review Conference. Specific reporting on risk reduction measures could be added to that repository.

12. The above standardized information should be provided to the Secretary-General, who should make such information available to Member States and to the public.⁶

13. States that maintain a role for nuclear weapons in their military and security concepts, doctrines and policies are encouraged to also provide standardized information at regular intervals on, inter alia:

- (a) The number, type (strategic or non-strategic) and status (deployed or non-deployed, and the alert status) of nuclear warheads within their territories;
- (b) The number and the type of delivery vehicles within their territories;
- (c) The measures taken to reduce the role and significance of nuclear weapons in military and security concepts, doctrines and policies.

II. Measures to reduce and eliminate the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations

14. The risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations will persist for as long as nuclear weapons exist. The only way to eliminate this risk is by achieving the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

15. Factors that could contribute to the current and growing risk of a nuclear weapon detonation include:

- Increasing tensions involving nuclear-armed and other States at the international and regional levels
- The vulnerability of nuclear-weapon command and control systems and early warning networks to cyberattacks and attacks by non-State actors
- The growing automation of weapon systems

16. At the same time, it is difficult to assess the precise nature of the risks given the lack of transparency in nuclear weapon programmes.

17. There is a widely shared concern that the maintenance of nuclear weapons at high alert levels could significantly multiply the risks and the threat posed by nuclear weapons and negatively affect the process of nuclear disarmament. In this regard, measures to reduce the operational status of nuclear weapons systems would increase human and international security and represent an interim step towards nuclear disarmament, as well as an effective measure to mitigate some of the risks associated with nuclear weapons.

18. Support from States for the implementation of measures to reduce risks and increase safety, pending the total elimination of nuclear weapons, does not imply support for any possession or use of nuclear weapons.

19. Measures to reduce the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations that States possessing nuclear weapons and other relevant States should undertake, pending the total elimination of nuclear weapons, include:

- (a) Reduce the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons;
- (b) Reduce the number of non-strategic and non-deployed nuclear weapons;

⁶ See [A/71/371](#).

- (c) Reduce nuclear weapons designated as surplus stockpiles;
- (d) Rapidly move towards an overall reduction of the global stockpile of any type of nuclear weapons;
- (e) Reduce risks associated with nuclear weapon delivery vehicles, in particular nuclear-armed cruise missiles, including actions to limit, prevent deployment of and lead to a ban on all nuclear-armed cruise missiles;
- (f) Commit to reduce, or at least freeze, the number of nuclear weapons in holding pending the commencement and conclusion of plurilateral negotiations on nuclear weapons reductions;
- (g) Reduce the role of nuclear weapons in security doctrines and the value assigned to the role of nuclear weapons in military training schools;
- (h) Develop and implement nuclear weapons policies that reduce and eliminate any dependence on early launch or launch-on-warning postures and refrain from increasing the alert levels of their nuclear forces;
- (i) Conclude agreements to eliminate launch-on-warning from their operational settings and carry out a phased stand-down of high-alert strategic forces;
- (j) Begin developing a long-term formal agreement to lower the alert level for the use of nuclear weapons, with all agreed steps to be measurable and carried out within an agreed time frame;
- (k) Increase the safety and security of nuclear weapon stockpiles;
- (l) Ensure the protection of nuclear-weapon command and control systems from cyberthreats;
- (m) Pending the entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, refrain from the development and use of new nuclear weapon technologies and any action that would undermine the object and purpose of the Treaty and maintain all existing moratoriums on nuclear-weapon-test explosions;
- (n) Pending negotiations and the entry into force of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, maintain and declare moratoriums on the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons purposes;
- (o) Dismantle or convert for peaceful uses facilities for the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices;
- (p) Respect fully their commitments with regard to security assurances, extend such assurances if they have not yet done so, constructively engage in dialogue to become a Party to or withdraw reservations and interpretative statements on the protocols to the treaties establishing nuclear-weapon-free zones;
- (q) Be more transparent regarding accidents involving nuclear weapons and on the steps taken in response to these accidents.

III. Other measures to reduce nuclear risks

20. Other measures to reduce the risks associated with nuclear weapons include but are not limited to:

- (a) Return to full implementation of the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START) by Russia and a swift negotiation and conclusion of a follow-on agreement by the United States and

Russia and possibly other nuclear-armed States that seeks to achieve deeper reductions and verifiable limits on all types of nuclear weapons, including Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF)-range nuclear-capable delivery systems;

(b) An immediate commitment by all nuclear-armed States not to increase the overall size of their nuclear arsenals nor to introduce new nuclear weapons delivery systems or new or modified nuclear warheads;

(c) Abandonment of “launch-under-attack” postures in light of the heightened risk for nuclear weapons use as a result of escalation and miscalculation;

(d) Adoption, as an interim step on the path to nuclear zero, of no-first-use policies by the nuclear-armed States;

(e) Concrete follow-through and implementation of commitments in joint statements, such as the one issued by the five nuclear-armed states reiterating the notion that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought” and the Group of 20 Bali declaration stating that “the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible” in order to maintain credibility of such statements;

(f) Negotiation of legally binding negative security assurances for non-nuclear weapon States at the Conference on Disarmament or in a different, United Nations-mandated negotiating forum;

(g) Avoidance of dual-use nuclear and conventional military installations and weapon platforms that can be armed with nuclear and conventional weapons to reduce the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation.

IV. Avoidance of actions that are not conducive to nuclear disarmament and that would increase the risk of nuclear conflict

21. There are a number of actions that are not conducive to nuclear disarmament and increase the risk of nuclear conflict. These include but are not limited to:

(a) Pursuit of new nuclear weapons systems, including their delivery systems;

(b) Implied and explicit threats of nuclear use;

(c) Provocative and escalatory actions or inflammatory and disparaging statements that increase the risk of a nuclear conflict, intentionally or through error or miscalculation;

(d) Reductions in transparency on nuclear arsenals, delivery systems or doctrines;

(e) Nuclear postures that assert the right to use nuclear weapons first (even in response to non-nuclear threats);

(f) Forward-movement of nuclear weapons, including to third countries.
