

Identifying Collaborative Actions to Reduce Today's Nuclear Dangers



UNIDIR NUCLEAR DIALOGUE SERIES

Findings from the UNIDIR Dialogue

In July 2020, the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) launched an informal dialogue on nuclear disarmament, nuclear deterrence, and strategic arms control. This paper showcases key propositions, findings, and recommendations from the UNIDIR dialogue. Some of these points are not new but take on greater importance in light of the dialogue; other points break new ground. They offer an approach for thinking about the nuclear problem today as well

as rebuilding the habits of global cooperation needed to address it successfully. Not all of the actions set out in this paper can be pursued at once, and readers – like the participants in the dialogue – may differ as to which actions are most important or ripe for pursuit now. Together, this paper's points offer a promising vision and the elements from which to craft an agenda for enhanced global collaboration to reduce today's nuclear dangers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATIVE ACTION AMONG MANY STATES

Why?

Three broad nuclear challenges that stand out today were at the centre of the UNIDIR dialogue: consolidating the non-use of nuclear weapons; recrafting strategic arms control, both to reduce the risks of nuclear deterrence and to enable nuclear disarmament; and revitalizing pursuit of nuclear disarmament. Collaborative action among States both globally and in different regions is essential to address these challenges and, in so

doing, reduce today's rising nuclear dangers. Collaborative action is necessary because none of these challenges can be met by the action of one State alone. Moreover, while the responsibilities fall heaviest on the nuclear-armed States, they do not fall exclusively on them. Despite prominent disagreements among nuclear policy officials and experts, there are also many shared interests and perspectives, not least in reducing today's stark nuclear dangers.

What Actions?

Building collaborative action calls for mutual acknowledgement that States and persons do not fit into simple boxes or "camps" (e.g. deterrers versus disarmers); all stakeholders must avoid the trap of oversimplifying and downplaying the views of others.

Collaborative action will be made more likely by a recognition that ethics and morality are not the exclusive purview of any one perspective: belief in the moral requirement to pursue nuclear disarmament is in tension with belief in the moral requirement to deter where nuclear deterrence is still required.

Strengthened efforts equally are needed to try to transcend the differences among States as well as among officials and experts within them.

In pursuit of collaborative action, States should build on, but also go beyond, the original arms control and disarmament architecture. Ways to do so are discussed in this paper.

Pursuit of collaborative action to reduce nuclear dangers will require crafting an overall agenda that defines priorities among the many actions set out here in a way that blunts more immediate rising dangers, seizes emerging opportunities, and translates initial success into sustained successes.

CONSOLIDATING THE NON-USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Why?

The nuclear taboo is in growing danger. Given the eroding geopolitical and security context and the reassessment by some States of the manageability and consequences of limited use of nuclear weapons, the threat of use of nuclear weapons is greater than it has been for many decades. The increased complexities and the uncertain impact on traditional nuclear deterrence relationships of deployments of new military tech-

What Actions?

Following the June 2021 reaffirmation by Presidents Biden and Putin (and, later, by Presidents Putin and Xi) of the Reagan-Gorbachev principle that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, all nuclear-armed States should make comparable statements. A multilateral statement both by the five nuclear-weapon States (NWS) recognized by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and by non-nuclear-weapon States (NNWS) at the 10th Review Conference would be one way to do so and would help strengthen the norm of non-use. Or the NWS, in the “P5 Process”, could make such a statement on their own if the Review Conference is again postponed.

The Russian Federation, and the United States of America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), should identify steps they could jointly take to implement the affirmation above, with coordinated adaptations for current doctrines and plans. Towards that end, they must strengthen their bilateral dialogue (including military-to-military contacts). They should also explore how to reduce the risks of inadvertent breakdown of nuclear deterrence through misinterpretation, miscalculation, and missteps, leading to unintended escalation.

China and the United States should also identify such steps. Towards that end, they should initiate bilateral official and semi-official dialogue, also with a view to reducing the risks of an inadvertent breakdown of nuclear deterrence. The two should also explore the possible value of a bilateral pledge not to be the first to undertake strategic attacks: “no first strategic attacks” (including no first use of nuclear weapons but also of other strategic capabilities).

In light of the Reagan-Gorbachev principle, other nuclear-armed States should determine what they can contribute in the way of adaptations to current doctrines, planning, and preparations for possible limited use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear-armed States should make clear in other ways their commitment to nuclear restraint, including by not emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in their security doctrines and

nologies (from more advanced missile defences to conventional precision strike systems), as well as the intensification of military competition in the domains of space and cyberspace, considerably heighten the danger of a breakdown of nuclear deterrence arising out of a conventional conflict. Even as attention shifts back to the dangers of inter-State competition, it is also essential to sustain focus on the dangers of acquisition and use of a nuclear device by a non-State actor.

political rhetoric; avoiding nuclear threat-making; ensuring that the principles of International Humanitarian Law are reflected in their nuclear targeting; and reaffirming that the employment of nuclear weapons would be contemplated only in the most extreme circumstances.

Nuclear-armed States should declare their intention to explore the conditions, including through consultation with allies, under which credible and demonstrated commitments could be made that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons would be to deter other nuclear weapons, pending their ultimate elimination.

In their discussions of nuclear risk reduction, the five NPT nuclear-weapon States (the “P5”) should reach agreement on and publicly announce specific risk reduction actions they will undertake now (e.g., not undertaking cyber probes or attacks against nuclear command and control systems).

The NWS and other non-NPT nuclear-armed States should launch a nuclear dialogue, with a focus on risk reduction as well as on the shared responsibilities of all nuclear-armed States.

Both supporters and opponents of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) should acknowledge their support for the TPNW’s goals of reducing the role of nuclear weapons, preventing a nuclear catastrophe, and advancing towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

All States should exercise political-military restraint, including commitments not to use force to advance territorial claims or bring about regime change, and should cooperate to reduce the risk of conventional conflict, which remains the most likely pathway to a nuclear confrontation.

All States should sustain and strengthen their cooperation to prevent use by a non-State actor of a nuclear weapon or improvised nuclear device, including by effective implementation of physical security for both peaceful and military fissile material, implementation of United Nations resolution 1540, and ensuring control over nuclear weapons.

RE-CRAFTING STRATEGIC ARMS CONTROL FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Why?

Strategic arms control can strengthen national, regional, and global security by reducing the risks of reliance on nuclear deterrence and strategic competition. Arms control processes can also enhance mutual understanding. But strategic arms control needs to be re-crafted for the twenty-first century. It needs to be adapted and pursued beyond the bilateral Russian-US relationship. It also needs to be broadened to address the full suite of capabilities of concern that increasingly impact nuclear weapons, including advanced missile defences, conventional precision strike systems, counter-space and offensive cyber capabilities, and artificial intelligence. Re-crafted strategic arms control also

needs to take advantage of a more comprehensive toolbox of arms-control-related options to reflect the strategic asymmetries and different perspectives among States. Where needed, such processes need to bring in, as full players, NNWS that have or are deploying capabilities that can impact crises and conflicts among nuclear-armed States. Allies of nuclear-armed States that would be impacted by future arms control initiatives equally need to be folded in to the process. In addition, given the potential failure modes of nuclear deterrence arising out of competition among nuclear-armed States across multiple domains, arms control should aim to restrain dangerous behaviour as well as constrain numbers, deployments, and capabilities.

What Actions?

Building on their January 2021 decision to extend the New START agreement for five years as well as the new Strategic Stability Talks begun in July 2021, the Russian Federation and the United States should sustain and intensify their dialogue to understand and then address the full range of each side's strategic concerns. They should seek agreement on future arms control actions to lessen competitive pressures; enhance the stability of their strategic relationship; collaboratively assess the impact on stability not only of legacy capabilities but also of new military technologies, as well as activities in new domains beyond nuclear (and options to mitigate those impacts); and reduce, cap or otherwise constrain capabilities.

China and the United States should initiate strategic dialogue to clarify each side's strategic perspectives and concerns and to explore areas of potential shared interests. Initially, dialogue could productively focus on their perspectives on strategic stability and its requirements, as well as on how to lessen uncertainties about each other's intentions and programmes. Over time, a more ambitious agenda may prove possible, focused on identifying collaborative actions that would lessen competitive pressures and measures to reduce, cap or otherwise constrain capabilities of concern.

Even while pursuing such bilateral engagement, more inclusive discussions at the trilateral, regional, and multilateral levels should be advanced – whether in existing or, possibly, new forums.

Adoption of the types of nuclear restraint measures discussed above – including, in particular, restraint by senior leaders of nuclear-armed States in how they speak about the role, importance, and benefits of nuclear weapons – can contribute to creating a more conducive political atmosphere at home and abroad for exploring new arms control initiatives.

All nuclear-armed States should maintain the nuclear testing moratorium (while seeking entry-into-force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty).

Intensified regional risk reduction and arms control engagement should be pursued within Europe, including dialogues between the NATO-US and Russian militaries as well as efforts to revitalize intra-European security forums.

Within Northeast Asia, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the United States should revitalize the Six-Party Talks, both to address nuclear dangers on the Korean Peninsula and as a forum in which to start a wider security conversation among themselves.

India and Pakistan bilaterally, as well as China, India, and Pakistan together, should explore opportunities to advance confidence-building efforts in South Asia.

The countries of Southeast Asia should renew collaboration with nuclear-armed States to resolve the differences related to the protocols (including negative security assurances) of the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone.

Countries within the region and those outside should take advantage of the new United Nations process on a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction to build towards that goal.

States should negotiate a legally binding agreement on fissile materials as a tangible building block for a nuclear-weapon-free world, preferably through multilateral negotiations in the Conference on Disarmament.

What Actions?

Non-nuclear-armed States, given their clear capabilities and equities, as well as the importance of their involvement for meaningful restraint, need to be part of negotiating and implementing future arms control agreements to regulate activities in space and in cyberspace as well as to mitigate the risks inherent in new advanced conventional military technologies (e.g., regulating hypersonic strike systems).

REVITALIZING PURSUIT OF NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Why?

Virtually all the world's nations have repeatedly endorsed the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. They have done so for many reasons, not mutually exclusive: recognition of the uncertainties and failure modes of nuclear deterrence, including the finite possibility of an eventual nuclear catastrophe due to the use of nuclear weapons; concern about the human security impacts of use of nuclear weapons; and the importance of progress in nuclear disarmament to ensure the effectiveness and legitimacy of the NPT, the most critical foundation stone of global non-proliferation success. In varying degrees, for nuclear-

What Actions?

Reduced reliance calls for joint actions, in ways discussed above, by nuclear-armed States to roll back shifts of doctrine and plans that posit that limited use of nuclear weapons will not escalate to levels of destructiveness much greater than the destructiveness of the conflicts that preceded nuclear use.

The "P5" should pursue agreement on a code of nuclear responsibilities, including principles and commitments to nuclear restraint, as well as a reaffirmed commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament.

States should pursue collaborative actions to reduce the risks and uncertainties of a nuclear-weapon-free world, including through international efforts to put in place the verification building blocks of a nuclear-weapon-free world; to define the specifics of such a world, including – not least – clarification of permissible and impermissible activities; to ameliorate conventional political-military confrontations; and to build confidence in compliance.

The nuclear-armed States should leverage the role of strategic arms control not only as a means to stabilize deterrence relationships but as an enabler of future disarmament progress, including by the conscious pursuit of arms control measures aimed at reducing reliance on nuclear weapons through changes of doctrine, posture, and policy that help put in place the building blocks of nuclear disarmament.

armed States, endorsement of the goal of a world without nuclear weapons also implicitly reflects their recognition of their nuclear predicament: partly relying for their security on weapons that if used in a full-scale nuclear war would destroy them. Revitalizing pursuit of nuclear disarmament will require parallel actions along three interrelated pathways, with prospects for successful action sometimes greater on one pathway than on another: reducing reliance on nuclear weapons; enhancing the appeal of a nuclear-weapon-free world by reducing its risks and uncertainties; and transforming thinking about the necessity, utility, legitimacy, and acceptability of nuclear weapons.

Even while seeking international consensus on the steps and way stations towards a nuclear-weapon-free world, all States should seek and take pragmatic steps towards that goal, always asking whether nuclear-related decisions take the world's States closer to or farther from a world without nuclear weapons.

All States should foster dialogue to transcend continuing differences that threaten to paralyse efforts towards a nuclear-weapon-free world. This includes dialogue among nuclear-armed States, between nuclear-armed States and non-nuclear-armed States, and between TPNW supporters and opponents, on the uncertainties, risks, ethics and morality of reliance on nuclear deterrence.

All States should support sustained and intensified efforts to strengthen public education, information, engagement, and discussion of nuclear deterrence and nuclear disarmament to ensure an informed debate.

All States should act to bring new and more diverse voices into that debate.

What Actions?

To change thinking to advance nuclear disarmament, leaders, officials, and the public, especially in nuclear-armed States, should look through the lens not only of citizens of particular nations but also as global citizens, particularly in assessing

nuclear dangers for all States' security; the uncertainties of sustained manageability of those dangers; and the risks of reliance on nuclear deterrence compared with the risks of a nuclear-weapon-free world.

IMPLEMENTING CONFIDENCE-RESTORING MEASURES

Why?

Pursuit of confidence-restoring measures tailored to specific axes of distrust – for example, among the P5, between the nuclear-armed protagonists, and among the NPT parties – is an essential enabler to make progress across each of the three challenges discussed above: consolidating the non-use of nuclear weapons; recrafting strategic arms control, both to reduce the risks of nuclear deterrence and to enable nuclear disarmament; and revitalizing pursuit of nuclear disarmament.

Such measures can provide a first step and act as enablers of collaborative action towards rebuilding habits of cooperation across the different communities. With that in mind, upcoming bilateral, multinational, and multilateral meetings (e.g. Head of State-level summit meetings, the 10th Review Conference of the NPT, or the first meeting of States parties to the TPNW) should be partly viewed as windows of opportunity to agree on these measures.

What Actions?

A Russian-US announcement of negotiations on the full suite of arms control issues that concern each of the two States as well as presidential-level endorsement of renewed strategic dialogue between China and the United States to moderate their increasingly adversarial relationship would be the first steps in these two relationships.

An NWS and NNWS agreement on a limited set of disarmament-related objectives to be realized by the 2025 Review Conference of the NPT also should be pursued at the 10th Review Conference.

NWS and NNWS should explore and take advantage of possible new and complementary mechanisms to restore confidence between them, including cooperation within the new Group of Governmental Experts on Nuclear Disarmament Verification, within the Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament process, and within a new United Nations Open-Ended Working Group on disarmament issues.

Supporters and opponents of the TPNW should focus on shared goals of avoiding the use of nuclear weapons and revitalizing pursuit of a world free of nuclear weapons, while managing their differences to achieve progress to these ends.

The new United Nations process on a Middle East zone free of weapons of mass destruction should be welcomed and supported.

In pursuing the more focused arms control dialogues proposed above, the States concerned should make it a priority to identify practical, feasible steps that can be implemented unilaterally, or in parallel, as confidence-restoring measures.

The participants of the dialogue whose names are listed below have agreed to associate themselves with the vision of this document, its emphasis on the urgency of renewed dialogue and collaboration to reduce nuclear dangers, and – without necessarily endorsing all of its proposed recommendations – with its overall agenda for collaborative action. They do so in their personal capacities and independently of their professional affiliations. They are listed by nationality only to indicate the breadth of the dialogue.

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About UNIDIR

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) is a voluntarily funded, autonomous institute within the United Nations. One of the few policy institutes worldwide focusing on disarmament, UNIDIR generates knowledge

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