Permanent Representation
of the Federal Republic of Germany
to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva

Statement

by

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Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral disarmament negotiations (OEWG)

Panel I on measures to reduce and eliminate the risk of accidental, mistaken, unauthorized or intentional nuclear weapon detonations

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- Germany recognizes that nuclear weapons, just like all complex weapon systems, require special consideration and responsible managing because of their destructive potential. Our awareness of the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons - intentional or an accidental - is a major driving force to discuss those risks..

- History shows us that the world has been extremely lucky: numerous incidents happened. We commend those Nuclear Weapon States which have been willing to share information concerning these “near misses” as well as sharing with the public the measures taken to prevent further incidents. This is the best policy to reassure the public in such difficult situations. At the same time, it goes without saying that it is also crucial to prevent that any piece of relevant information which might be used by criminals or terrorists is published or leaked.

- Nuclear risks have not been limited to the Cold War. It is therefore still the duty of any responsible Nuclear Weapon State to do the very maximum, sparing no resources, to prevent an accident involving a nuclear weapon which could lead to radiation being released, in extreme cases even to a nuclear detonation or, even worse, an accidental launch with the added risk of an ensuing conflict with a nuclear dimension.

- While the risks connected with nuclear weapons cannot be denied, it is difficult to see why those risks should be higher today than during the heyday of the Cold War. To the contrary, they are, judging on the basis of available information (and acknowledging that sound risk assessments are always difficult), much lower today.

    - Today, the risk that any nuclear power could even envisage a disarming first strike is extremely remote.

    - Alerting postures have been significantly reduced after the end of the Cold War. With regard to US substrategic nuclear weapons allocated to NATO we can say that today alert levels are measured in weeks rather than, as in the past, days or even hours.

    - The risk of an accident is lower today, since the strategic bomber forces of the US have been de-alerted. They are not loaded with nuclear weapons day-to-day. If we recall Eric Schlosser's findings in his important book "Command and Control", several near-misses involved these strategic bomber forces.

    - It is also to be commended that both the US and Russia as well as France and the UK are observing a policy of targeting the high sea and not any inhabited territory. In the extremely unlikely event of an unauthorized launch this policy would help prevent a nuclear escalation.

    - The risk is also lower because there are *Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres* in both Washington and Moscow which function on a 24/7 basis and guarantee that, in times of crisis, misunderstandings do not arise. The history of the Cold War shows us that such a direct communication channel is of the greatest significance.

However, it is true that, in certain parts of the world, we are faced with new challenges. We see the arms race in South East Asia as a real concern. Everything should be done to improve confidence between India and Pakistan and to encourage them to take the path of de-escalation. But these two states have also made plain that they recognize their responsibilities as nuclear weapon possessors and have managed severe conflicts (such as the Kargil conflict) without taking recourse to irresponsible nuclear brinkmanship.

In that regard, measures need to be implemented to ensure that nuclear weapons remain safe, secure and under positive control — "nuclear surety" should be an overriding national priority, especially for the NWS. This involves significant science and engineering efforts that draw on the lessons of the past and are aimed at preventing an accidental or inadvertent detonation. The history of near-misses also shows us that it is extremely important that nuclear weapons incorporate safety features that prevent a detonation even in case of fire or the weapon being dropped after an accident. All components essential to detonation must be isolated from electrical energy, such as lightning or power surges.

Nuclear weapons need to incorporate safety design features that minimize the possibility of nuclear detonation due to accidents, errors, or acts of nature. But also unusual situations like aircraft accidents, lightning strikes or missiles have to be addressed. Therefore, the employment of environmental sensing devices seems to be an option providing both safety and control and preventing inadvertent functioning of the circuit.

Pits for storage of nuclear weapons must be fire-safe. In the extremely unlikely case of someone tampering with a nuclear weapon it must be ensured that critical components of the warhead are disabled and that, at all times, a detonation is possible only once a command is given by the political authorities entitled to ordering a nuclear strike in accordance with standard operating procedures.

Last, but definitely not least, we have to talk about cyber risks. We all share the concern that the risk of cyber-attacks against military installations is a real one and must never be underestimated since it is one of the most dangerous menaces we are facing nowadays. Even if the most likely cyber threat to nuclear weapons systems would probably come from adversary states trying to prevent a launch rather than cause one, still the maximum needs to be done to ensure that there are multiple physical as well as procedural barriers to prevent the manipulation of the weapons.

It is good news that there is growing consensus that States should not conduct or knowingly support information and communications technologies activity contrary to their obligations under international law that intentionally damages critical infrastructure or otherwise impairs the use and operation of critical infrastructure to provide services to the public. Military nuclear installations and other military objectives located at or in the vicinity of these military nuclear installations shall not be made the object of cyber-enabled attacks, if such attacks may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequent severe losses among the civilian population.

Again, we believe that responsible Nuclear Weapon States are already taking these measures. Our conversation here would greatly benefit from their participation. After all, it is obvious that the safety of nuclear weapons is a concern shared by all States, but a particular pressing concern for those States which actually manage these weapons. It is such one area where there is potential for consensus. This OEWG should thus strive to agree on recommendations which are ambitious as well as realistic and could help to pave the way for dialogue with the States which are responsible for handling these weapons.