Other disarmament measures and international security – developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security


Check against delivery

Mr Chairman

Australia attaches great importance to the cumulative work of the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security (UNGGE).

Australia regrets the 2016-17 UNGGE was unable to agree a substantive consensus report. It is important to note that
the cumulative reports of the UNGGE have considerably deepened common understandings on international law, norms of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace, confidence building measures and capacity building. Australia remains committed to, and will continue to promote, the common understandings articulated in the UNGGE’s previous reports.

We wish to thank Karsten Geier for his Chairmanship of the Group.

Mr Chairman

We reaffirm our commitment to a free, open, peaceful and secure cyberspace. The foundation for responsible state behaviour in cyberspace is our mutual commitment to existing international law, including the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the application of international humanitarian law to cyber operations in armed conflict.

Australia reaffirms that the UN Charter applies in its entirety to state actions in cyberspace, including the prohibition of the use of force (Article 2(4)), the peaceful settlement of disputes (Article 33), and the inherent right of states to act in individual and collective self-defence in response to an armed attack (Article 51). The law of state responsibility also applies to cyber operations in peacetime, including the doctrine of countermeasures in response to internationally wrongful acts.
Mr Chairman

Australia’s Foreign Minister launched our inaugural International Cyber Engagement Strategy on 4 October. The Strategy prioritises and coordinates Australia’s whole-of-Government approach to international engagement across the full spectrum of cyber affairs. This includes digital trade, cyber security, cybercrime, international security and cyberspace, internet governance and cooperation, human rights and democracy online, as well as technology for development.

Mr Chairman

As outlined in the Strategy, Australia’s goal is a stable and peaceful online environment.

Malicious cyber activity has the potential to threaten international peace, security and stability. We also recognise that, as more and more states seek to exert power through cyberspace, there is increased potential for activities in this domain to lead to misperception, miscalculation, escalation and, in the most extreme cases, conflict.

To foster a peaceful and stable online environment, it is vital that we set clear expectations for state behaviour in cyberspace. It is in all of our interests that states behave appropriately in cyberspace.

When operating in cyberspace, states need to comply with existing international law. This includes, when applicable, their obligations under International Humanitarian Law or
the Law of Armed Conflict. While the domain is comparatively new, the rules are not.

To enable agile responses, existing international law is complemented by norms of responsible state behaviour. Norms promote predictability, stability and security. Good progress has been made in developing a universal set of norms, especially through the UNGGE process.

Mr Chairman

This existing body of international law and norms is further complemented by confidence building measures (“CBMs”). CBMs foster trust between states to prevent misunderstandings that could lead to conflict.

Finally, the international stability framework is supported by coordinated capacity building programs. At the launch of the Strategy, our Foreign Minister announced an increase in funding to Australia’s Cyber Capacity Program – taking our total commitment to $14 million over four years.

Mr Chairman

Having established a firm foundation of international law and norms, the international community must now ensure there are effective and proportionate consequences for those who act contrary to this consensus.

Australia is committed to supporting an international cooperative architecture that promotes stability, and
responds to and deters unacceptable behaviour in cyberspace.

Through adopting a comprehensive and coordinated approach to cyber affairs, Australia is promoting and protecting a peaceful and stable online environment, on which we will all ultimately depend.

Thank you