Measures to Reduce Nuclear Risks and Pave the way for Nuclear Disarmament

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Your Excellencies, Fellow NGOs,

This presentation is an updated version of one made last October in First Committee.
The topic of reducing nuclear risk was frighteningly relevant at that time. Subsequent developments have made it even more terrifyingly to the point, both with respect to the US/NATO-Russia relationship, and yet more so with respect to the DPRK and the USA.
The recommendations we made in October 2016 and which we now repeat, remain even more 'to the point' than they were when we first made them. Nuclear weapons use and even nuclear war from miscalculation, madness or malfunction were already much too likely in October 2016. Now they are a truly frightening possibility.

Risk reduction is an urgent existential priority.

Conflicts between the nuclear-armed and allied states and differences between governments more broadly need to be resolved well before they reach the level of crises, by the use of diplomacy, detente and common security mechanisms, rather than nuclear threat postures, and a language of ultimata.

With regard to reducing the risks of nuclear weapons use, we call above all on the US and Russia above all to stand-down their land-based ICBM forces so that Presidents no longer have to make potentially apocalyptic decisions in minutes, based on incoming missile warnings that might be spurious, or arising out of conflicts that escalate along with nuclear threat postures.
The language of nuclear threat being used by both the DPRK AND by President Trump
in the current US-North Korea (DPRK) standoff does nothing to diminish the likelihood of conflict, and possibly nuclear conflict, between the parties. Rather it makes it all the more likely that miscalculation and possible pre-emptive strikes (and pre-pre-emptive strikes) will dominate calculations, with potentially tragic results.

Even limited use of 'tactical' nuclear weapons (for example) by or against the DPRK, will cause the world to cross a terrifying threshold. Once nuclear weapons have been used a third time in anger, the taboo against nuclear use will have been broken. This must never happen.

It bears repeating that a large-scale US-Russia nuclear 'exchange' would terminate what we call civilization, in its first minutes, and that prolonged low temperatures globally following the destruction of the world's largest cities would at least place question marks over human survival. Rex Tillerson remarks recently that two powers with 93% of the world's nuclear weapons 'cannot afford' relationships at the low point that US-Russian relationships are now at, are very much to the point.

Resolutions in First Committee advocating a stand-down of nuclear weapon systems include Reducing Nuclear Dangers and Operational readiness of Nuclear Weapon Systems, which both equally deserve the very widest support. It would be especially gratifying to see some non-NAM support for reducing Nuclear Dangers, perhaps accompanied by appropriate EoVs.

As this is an NPT prep-com, the lowering of operational status of nuclear forces must have a high priority in any final text, both as a measure to ensure the survival of civilization and humans as a species, and as an essential step to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Risk reduction measures are indeed of truly existential, human survival, significance. We are now in a time of increasing tensions between nuclear powers, reminiscent of the great-power jostling of 1914, but with the added risk of nuclear weapons poised to be used. Recent political and strategic developments add an element of instability to this already flammable mix.

An accidental or intentional military incident in North Korea, or Syria, the Ukraine, or the Baltic States, could send the world spiraling into a disastrous nuclear confrontation.

Both Russia and the US have conducted nuclear-weapons-related exercises in Europe, elevating the risks of a nuclear catastrophe. Nuclear risks are now being escalated, not reduced. It is imperative that provocative deployments and exercises cease. In particular, 'snap' exercises involving nuclear forces should no longer take place, most especially opposite other opposing nuclear-armed forces. A number of prominent authorities (Global Zero, the European Leadership Network) have recently performed studies pointing both to the increasing number of NATO-Russian forces incidents, and to the possibilities for catastrophic escalation and miscalculation.

There are a range of other risk reduction measures that can be taken, notably, making land-based ICBMs unavailable for instant launch and adopting policies never to use nuclear weapons first. We are encouraged that some nuclear-armed States have already adopted no-first-use (NFU) policies, and urge others to do the same. We urge governments that have adopted policies of NFU not to jettison or dilute or place
conditions on those policies. No-first-use policies should be accompanied by a recognition of a norm of non-use, and the incompatibility of use of nuclear weapons with international humanitarian law.

All nuclear-armed states are modernizing their arsenals. Russia and the US in particular both have prominent and very costly upgrading programs even as actual numbers are supposed to decrease.

Rather than relying more on nuclear weapons in such tense times, nuclear-reliant countries should be encouraged to utilize the legal and cooperative security mechanisms of the United Nations and of regional organizations in order to resolve or manage conflicts, monitor ceasefires, verify disarmament and render nuclear weapons unnecessary for security. The parliaments of nuclear armed and nuclear reliant States have called for this in consensus resolutions adopted by the Inter Parliamentary Union and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as well as the European Parliament itself. Specific examples of such conflict resolution include:

a) The example of diplomacy with Iran that has reduced the threat of nuclear proliferation and war and in the Middle East (JCPOA),

b) The already noted resolution adopted by consensus by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, comprising 56 member parliaments including Russia and the US, calling on their governments to reduce nuclear threat postures, take all nuclear weapons off alert, adopt no-first-use policies and join negotiations for nuclear disarmament.

Security doctrines need to be modified to afford a lesser and lesser role for nuclear weapons and then to eliminate them altogether. If decreases in operational availability are part of this picture as they must be, then the likelihood of an 'apocalypse' bought about by madness, miscalculation or malfunction decreases. Currently, movement is in the opposite direction as nuclear threats are being made more and more lightly. If the interlocutors are the US and the DPRK the result will be tragic for NE Asia. If the interlocutors are NATO and Russia, the results are a global catastrophe beyond imagination.

A final area in which effort is required, is that of transparency and military-to-military and Government to Government communication.

In 1998, in the wake of the 1995 'Black Brant' Norwegian research rocket incident, in which Boris Yeltsin's nuclear briefcase was opened because a Norwegian research rocket sent up to study the Aurora Borealis was mistaken for a possible submarine-launched US first strike against Moscow, the US and Russian governments agreed to establish a joint data exchange centre, (JDEC) in which NATO and Russian militaries would exchange strategically significant data about launches and imminent launches. The idea has been thought to be so good, that US and Russian intent to proceed with JDEC has been reaffirmed four or five times. But the data exchange centre has simply never been built. A number of other good proposals for greater military to military communication also exist. These should be bought to realization.

We urge nuclear armed governments to eliminate reliance on nuclear weapons and ensure
that humanity is not destroyed by accident, miscalculation or intent. We are lucky to have made it this far. Prohibition leading to abolition, AND risk reduction do not so much make history, as make history possible. A continuation of current trends, and the absence of any efforts whatsoever to reduce the risk of nuclear war, could, if continued indefinitely and if enough things go wrong, mean the end of all history. It is essential that this malevolent trajectory be reversed.