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Open-ended Working Group taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations[1]

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Item 5 of the agenda
Taking forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations

Nuclear armed cruise missiles

Submitted by Sweden and Switzerland

Introduction

1. Nuclear armed cruise missiles are a particularly dangerous type of nuclear weapon. They can be launched without warning and it is impossible for a targeted state, or a state that believes it is targeted, to distinguish between cruise missiles that carry a nuclear warhead and cruise missiles that carry a conventional warhead. This may lead to particular risks for misidentification and thus for retaliation with nuclear arms, with associated catastrophic consequences.

Background

2. A cruise missile is a guided missile used against terrestrial targets, designed to deliver a warhead over long distances and with high accuracy. They often cruise at low altitudes and are hard to detect which leaves the targeted State with little time to react. Several versions of cruise missiles exist with different capacities with regard to payload and range. They have been developed and produced by several countries and have also been acquired and deployed by a further number of States.

3. Today, three countries have nuclear armed cruise missiles:

- The United States of America retired its nuclear sea launched cruise missiles in 2011. It currently has 575 air launched cruise missiles (ALCM) with a service life to 2030, with plans to begin developing around 1,000 Long-Range Standoff (LRSO) air launched cruise missiles in coming years.

[1] Established pursuant to resolution 70/33 of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

- France recently upgraded its nuclear air launched cruise missiles, the Air-Sol Moyenne Portée-Amélioré, and according to President Hollande currently has 54 ASMP-A cruise missiles.
- While details are less clear, the Russian Federation has nuclear cruise missiles and is believed to be improving its capabilities.

4. Though no other country has confirmed having similar capabilities, it is believed that some may be pursuing nuclear armed cruise missiles.

Risk implications

5. Nuclear armed cruise missiles carry with them some very specific risk implications. Cruise missiles can be launched without warning and come in both nuclear and conventional versions. The latter version is more common and has on several occasions over the last decades been used by States, including nuclear-weapon States, against military targets in other States or against non-state actors such as terrorist groups located on the territory of other States.

6. In any armed conflict involving a State that has cruise missiles in its armory, it is likely that these weapons will be deployed when the military target is deemed sufficiently important or well defended to justify the use of cruise missiles in an attack. This also applies to a state with access to both conventionally and nuclear armed cruise missiles. If the attacking state is a nuclear armed State with access to nuclear armed cruise missiles, then the risk of mistaking the conventional missile for a nuclear one is evident. If the target State also is a nuclear armed State, the consequences of this mistake could be fatal and trigger a nuclear weapons exchange.

7. Another situation where the risk of mistaken identity and thus of use and escalation exists is where the military target for a conventional attack is located in a nuclear allied State without nuclear weapons, or in a State where for other reasons the potential target is seen as a vital security interest for a State that possesses nuclear weapons.

8. Since cruise missiles also are hard to detect, a State under attack will likely have limited time to make a decision and further evaluate the threat. This further increases the risk of a nuclear weapons exchange.

9. In the above examples the risk implications are clear: how will the targeted States know that the cruise missiles are not nuclear armed? What can be the consequences in case of misidentification?

10. This risk of use with unacceptable consequences was recognized by USA President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Union General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev when they included the elimination of ground-launched nuclear armed cruise missiles in the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), and by USA President George H.W. Bush when he ordered sea-launched nuclear armed cruise missiles to be initially taken off USA surface vessels in 1991, with President Obama retiring these weapons in 2011.

11. Mr. Philip Hammond, as United Kingdom defense secretary in 2013, stated that: “A cruise-based deterrent would carry significant risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. At the point of firing, other states could have no way of knowing whether we had launched a conventional cruise missile or one with a nuclear warhead. Such uncertainty could risk triggering a nuclear war at a time of tension.” Thus, the United Kingdom decided the same year not to pursue sea launched cruise missiles, keeping its nuclear forces to solely ballistic missiles.

12. A further allocation of resources to develop nuclear armed cruise missiles would serve to reduce trust and alter strategic calculations among nuclear armed States. It would increase the risk of use and undermine efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons. It could also encourage the proliferation of such weapon systems in regions where they are not present yet, such as East and South Asia, which would further increase the negative consequences for peace and security.

Nuclear Armed Cruise Missiles and the Open-ended Working Group taking Forward Multilateral Disarmament Negotiations

13. In recognizing the link between the particular risks associated with nuclear armed cruise missiles and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, Sweden and Switzerland, proposes that the Open-ended Working Group agree on the following recommendations:

- Recommend that States initiate or engage in a process to reduce risks associated with nuclear armed cruise missiles.
- Recommend that such a process could include actions to limit, prevent deployment of and lead to a ban on all nuclear armed cruise missiles, regardless if they are launched from the sea, air or ground. These actions could be taken by States on a unilateral, bilateral, plurilateral or multilateral basis.
- Recommend that the USA and the Russian Federation engage in technical discussions to resolve any concerns with the implementation of the INF Treaty with regard to nuclear armed cruise missiles.