



EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND DEBATE AT THE CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT (CD): A VIEW FROM PAKISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



In addition to the modernisation of nuclear weapon systems and doctrinal shifts, Pakistan considers the militarisation and weaponisation of emerging technologies as a major risk, which if not addressed on time by the Conference on Disarmament (CD), can pose serious threats to regional and global peace and stability. “The age we live in now, with increasing weaponisation, integration and operationalisation of space and cyber technologies and hypersonic delivery systems, this lethality and the ensuing risks have multiplied manifold, as have implications for strategic entanglement.” This was said by Ambassador Khalil Hashmi, Permanent Representative of Pakistan, at the recent Plenary Meeting of the CD.¹

Mr Sohail Mahmood, Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, was also vocal about these threats in his statement at the High-Level Segment of the CD. “By affording more intrusion, speed, precision and lethality, these can threaten the core security interests of states thus introducing non-linear pathways of escalation to the strategic level,” he said.² Mr Mehmoood also draws attention to the risks that come with the integration of emerging technologies with outer space. Pakistan holds a

¹ Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the UN Geneva, “Statement by Ambassador Khalil Hashmi, Permanent Representative of Pakistan, at the Plenary Meeting of the Conference on Disarmament,” May 12, 2021, <https://pakungeneva.pk/TopicDetail.aspx?ID=536>

² Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Press Releases, “Statement by Mr. Sohail Mahmood, Foreign Secretary of Pakistan at the High-Level Segment of the Conference on Disarmament,” February 24, 2021, <http://mofa.gov.pk/statement-by-mr-sohail-mahmoood-foreign-secretary-of-pakistan-at-the-high-level-segment-of-the-conference-on-disarmament-24-february-2021/>

view that convergence of militarisation and weaponisation of emerging technologies with outer space will not only result in a renewed focus on outer space as the next domain of great power competition but also endangers “deterrence stability on earth.” The integration of anti-ballistic missiles (ABM) with outer-space assets and anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities has already threatened the security, safety and sustainability of outer space. Furthermore, he also stressed that the development of new weapons and integration of emerging technologies with existing conventional weapons will also disturb the conventional equation at international, regional and sub-regional levels. Such developments could undermine strategic stability as conventional asymmetries and reliance on nuclear weapons are directly proportional to each other.³

Pakistan has proposed various measures at CD to deal with the risks, challenges and threats posed by these emerging technologies. For the prevention of nuclear war, the CD should prioritise the nuclear risks and dangers that come with these technological innovations. Like outer space, conventional and nuclear domains, the CD should also explore the paradigm of risk reduction measures in the domain of emerging technologies irrespective of their civilian uses. Furthermore, the CD should give precedence to the serious and meaningful negotiations to finalise a legally binding treaty for the Prevention of Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS). The CD has the mandate as well as responsibility to control the weaponisation of outer space as well as its integration with the emerging technologies for military purposes.⁴

The fundamental reason behind these proposed measures and all other measures before them is the great amount of significance that Pakistan has always attached to the CD. Pakistan considers the CD as the most important organ of international arms control and disarmament regime and willing to provide all necessary political, diplomatic and technical support. In light of this greater significance, Pakistan wants the CD to adopt a comprehensive, objective and rule-based approach to fulfil its responsibilities towards global arms control and disarmament. In a contemporary international system, states are engaged in great power competition, rapidly modernising their military capabilities, abandoning the bilateral and multilateral treaties and little interest in concluding new treaties. The current deadlock at the CD and other multilateral arms control forums is a testament to these shifts.

The CD and its predecessors have the credit to negotiate and conclude major multilateral arms control and disarmament treaties like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production,

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Ibid.,

Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction (CWC) and the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction (BWC). The CD must strive to regain its lost glory and break the deadlock of the last two decades. Addressing the risks, challenges and threats of new types of weapons of mass destruction and new weapon systems is one of the key issue areas of the CD as defined by the Tenth Special Session on Disarmament of the United Nations General Assembly (SSOD-I) in 1978.⁵ However, few members of the CD believe that there are various other UN fora, which are already deliberating on these technologies e.g. Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS), Group of Governmental Experts Advancing responsible State behaviour in cyberspace in the context of international security, Open-ended Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), etc. Furthermore, the dual-use nature and intangibility of these emerging technologies will affect the existing understanding of weapons of mass destruction and the tools required for their regulation. This could alter the basic structure and the ways CD works.⁶ But, the interconnectedness of these technologies with each other as well as with other domains would affect the understanding and progress on other key issues of the CD with time. Therefore, the CD should start deliberation on these technologies, which will also complement the ongoing debate in other UN fora.

⁵ United Nations, Office for Disarmament Affairs, Conference on Disarmament, accessed on June 5, 2021, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/conference-on-disarmament>

⁶ United Nations Geneva, Meeting Summaries, Conference on Disarmament holds Thematic Plenary Discussion on New Weapons Of Mass Destruction, September 8, 2020, <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2020/09/la-conference-du-desarmement-discute-des-nouvelles-armes-de>