Mr Chairman,

Belgium fully associates itself with the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union.

Nine years ago, a prospective Nobel Peace Prize laureate observed that “the cold war has disappeared but thousands of (nuclear) weapons have not... the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up”. Today, the cold war seems to have been replaced by a new “Great Power competition”. Nuclear weapon states are modernizing their arsenals. One of them is taunting the international community with the announcement of new “invincible” systems. Another one is building up the size of its nuclear weapons arsenal. Nuclear possessor states outside the NPT are also increasing their capabilities. In South Asia we witness the development of nuclear triads and efforts to facilitate rapid launch and to enhance usability with potentially destabilizing effects.

The frustration of the non nuclear weapon states and civil society facing this situation is understandable. So is their quest for new approaches to reinvigorate the disarmament process. However, new initiatives carry new risks, especially if they abandon the principles which underpin durable and effective nuclear disarmament, such as verifiability and irreversibility. As the destructive power of nuclear weapons is beyond par, they offer a unique strategic leverage to their possessors. Therefore, successful disarmament approaches applied to other weapon systems do not necessarily carry the same weight in the nuclear field. There is no short cut to a nuclear weapon free world. Belgium reaffirms its commitment to the progressive approach.

Mr Chairman,

Given the growing international divergence on the way forward for nuclear disarmament, it may be tempting to continue the debate only under like-minded states. However, the goal of a nuclear weapon free world is both a shared objective and a shared responsibility. Only a constructive dialogue involving
all stakeholders holds the potential of realizing genuine progress. Each state can contribute to creating the conditions that are conducive to nuclear disarmament. States can help reduce regional tension and contribute to confidence building. They should speak up when international legal norms are being violated, including when these norms pertain to other weapons of mass destruction regimes.

Shared responsibility does not mean equal responsibility and there can be no doubt that the nuclear-armed states shoulder the main responsibility for achieving a nuclear weapon free world. Once again, we appeal to the nuclear-armed states to undertake effective measures to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in their doctrine, and to take steps for the reduction of their arsenals both in the strategic, non-strategic, deployed and non-deployed systems. The threshold for the use of nuclear weapons should not be lowered. We regret that the restraint in the nuclear discourse that we witnessed during many years is now being undercut by nuclear posturing.

Mr Chairman,

Making progress is strenuous under the current deteriorating security context. But we should not lose sight of the fact that arms control in itself can play a significant role in easing tension and reestablishing trust between adversaries. Indeed, tension between great powers often lends urgency to the call for measures to limit the probability or the scope of conflict, as the many arms control treaties agreed upon during the Cold War can testify.

Earlier this year, an important milestone was set when the New START Treaty took full effect. The current level of deployed strategic nuclear weapons is now at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. As a minimum, New START should be prolonged beyond its expiry date of February 2021. But we call upon the US and Russia to increase the ambition level by further decreasing the deployment level of strategic weapons and by starting negotiations on reductions of all nuclear weapon systems.

Recent events have underscored the crucial importance of verification and compliance with disarmament treaties. As a member of the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, Belgium contributes to the effort to address the technical challenges regarding the verification of nuclear dismantlement. This and similar initiatives should feed into a wider effort, supported by the whole NPT community. The establishment of a Group of Governmental Experts is a first, welcome step in this regard.

Nuclear risk reduction is another area where we can move forward. The safe and secure control over nuclear weapons and other nuclear material must prevent accidental or unauthorized nuclear detonations, or their diversion to terrorist or criminal organizations. A frank and open discussion is also needed on tools and procedures to assure sufficient time for rational decision-making. This includes addressing current alert levels and doctrines on nuclear employment.

To allow for a full-scope discussion on these and other issues, the current lopsided approach to transparency should end. We welcome the openness shown by some nuclear-weapon states and we call upon the others to attain the same standard.