TOWARDS A MORE STABLE AND SECURE ICT ENVIRONMENT:
UNPACKING INTER-STATE COOPERATION

UNIDIR UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE
FOR DISARMAMENT RESEARCH

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

▲ "Towards a More Stable and Secure ICT Environment: Unpacking Inter-State Cooperation"
was held on 2 December 2022 in Geneva.

The conference "Towards a More Stable and Secure ICT Environment: Unpacking Inter-State Cooperation", held in Geneva, 2 December 2022, facilitated a structured discussion among State representatives on the operationalization of the concept of inter-State cooperation in the context of international information and communications technology (ICT) security.

After the opening remarks delivered by Dr. Robin Geiss, the director of UNIDIR and H.E. Burhan Gafoor, Chair of the Open-ended Working Group (OEWG) on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies (2021–2025), emphasizing the importance of inter-State cooperation in the challenging geopolitical environment, the conference addressed three aspects of inter-State cooperation on matters of international ICT security.

The first panel discussed various cooperative mechanisms for peace and stability in the ICT environment. The discussion emphasized the need to establish a global Points of Contact network and directory in the context of international ICT security and a critical infrastructure protection early warning system. While there was consensus on the importance of the agreed voluntary norms of responsible State use of ICTs, some State representatives believe inter-State cooperation should be aimed at negotiating a new legal regime dedicated to international ICT security while others argued in favour of concerted efforts towards the implementation of the said voluntary norms, namely through the *Programme of action to advance responsible State behaviour in the use of ICTs in the context of international security*.

The second panel centred on inter-State cooperation and confidence-building. The discussion recognized the value of confidence-building measures and their role in reducing misconceptions and risks to international security. The interventions during the second panel frequently stressed the confidence-building role of the current OEWG, including the proposal of a global Points of Contact network and directory, currently debated under the auspices of the OEWG. Speakers also shared regional confidence-building experiences and practices from the Organization of American States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

The third panel was dedicated to the issues at the intersection of capacity-building and inter-State cooperation. Capacity-building can enhance inter-State cooperation. At the same time, inter-State cooperation is needed to ensure a strategic approach to cybersecurity capacity-building. The latter should be targeted, context-specific and apolitical. To facilitate capacity-building, some suggested establishing a dedicated international fund.

2. INTRODUCTION

▲ The conference provided a platform for structured discussion among State representatives and other relevant experts on inter-State cooperation practices in the field of international ICT security.

Cooperation between States is a fundamental pillar of international peace and security, and the digital environment is no exception. The importance of effective and constructive cooperation among States has been highlighted in all of the multilateral processes discussing information and communications technology (ICT) in the context of international peace and security, including the six iterations of the Group of Governmental Experts and, since 2019, two Open-ended Working Groups.

Cognizant of the imperative nature of the inter-State cooperation, UNIDIR organized the conference "Towards a More Stable and Secure ICT Environment: Unpacking Inter-State Cooperation". The aim of the conference was to explore how the concept of inter-State cooperation can be operationalized in different contexts and for different purposes. The conference provided a platform for structured discussion among State representatives and other relevant experts on concrete examples of good practices in the field of cooperation.

The hybrid nature of the conference enabled world-wide participation. One hundred and eighty participants attended the conference on the 2 December 2022. Twenty-one State representatives participated at the event in person, 58 State representatives joined virtually, and 101 individuals followed the public broadcast on YouTube. All the participants providing evaluation at the end of the event (strongly) agreed the content of the event was relevant to their work and three quarters of the respondents were satisfied with the event content.

The following is a summary of the thematic discussions at the conference. To revisit the conference in its entirety, please consult the recording available on the dedicated conference webpage.

3. SUMMARY OF THE CONFERENCE DISCUSSIONS

▲ In addition to the discussion about the existing and potential inter-State cooperation mechanisms, the conference participants deliberated on cooperation in the context of confidence- and capacity-building measures.

3.1 CONFERENCE OPENING

The conference was opened by the director of UNIDIR, **Dr. Robin Geiss**, and Chair of the Open-ended working group (OEWG) on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies 2021–2025, **H.E. Burhan Gafoor**.

Dr. Geiss initially emphasized the importance of inter-State cooperation in a challenging geopolitical environment. The conference, as stressed by Dr. Geiss, provides a platform for a structured discussion on the international efforts towards stability and security of the ICT environment.

The sentiment was echoed by H.E. Gafoor, acknowledging the successful cooperation among States in the context of the OEWG to date. According to H.E. Gafoor, inter-State cooperation is crucial to advancing ICT security. No single State can achieve security on its own in the ICT environment. States should engage in further discussions and try to find a common ground on which to cooperate, to build understanding and consensus. However, inter-State cooperation is most effective when all States have the sufficient capacity to meaningfully participate in the various cooperation formats. In this regard, capacity-building is the key enabler of inter-State cooperation.

3.2 PANEL 1 – COOPERATION FOR STABILITY AND SECURITY IN THE ICT ENVIRONMENT

Rules, norms and principles guiding State behaviour in the use of ICT calls for States to cooperate to increase stability and security of the ICT environment. How are States implementing this norm? What kind of cooperation is taking place beyond the OEWG itself? What kind of measures can be developed or applied? What is the interplay between different types of cooperation (e.g., bilateral, regional and international)?

Moderator: **Dr. Giacomo Persi Paoli** (Head of the Programme, Security and Technology, UNIDIR)

Speakers:

- **Mr. Artur R. Lyukmanov** (Acting Director of the Foreign Ministry's Department of International Information Security; Russian Federation); Mr. Lyukmanov, shared his speaking slot with **Mr. Sergei Boiko** (Head of Department at the Staff of the Security Council; Russian Federation)

- **H.E. Egriselda Aracely González López** (Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, New York; El Salvador)

- **Ms. Ziyan Xu** (Third Secretary, Office for Cyber Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; China)

In the first panel, speakers initially addressed several issues related to the effectiveness of inter-State cooperate in a challenging contemporary geopolitical context. The need to remain committed to peace and stability in the ICT environment, as well as to continue fostering dialogue among States, was recalled. A values-based system, one rooted in solidarity, common security interests and absent of ideological divisions, is what the international community should aspire to in order to promote international ICT security.

There were a number of suggestions of how to strengthen inter-State cooperation in the ICT environment. Speakers emphasized the need to establish a global Points of Contact network and directory in the context of international ICT security and a critical infrastructure protection early warning system.

Panellists also expressed the commitment of their governments to the framework of voluntary norms of responsible State behaviour in the ICT environment. Some representatives voiced concern over a selective approach towards these norms. Norm B, calling on States to exhibit prudence in attributing cyber operations and suggesting that States should substantiate attribution claims, served as an illustration for the argument. In the opinion of some speakers, States resort to unsubstantiated accusations far too often.

A solution to the aforementioned issue, argued by some, would be to strengthen the framework of States' use of ICTs by agreeing on a new dedicated international legally binding regime. Not all speakers concurred with the need for a special legal framework, instead suggesting greater international focus on capacity-building aimed at fostering the implementation of the existing voluntary normative framework. The establishment of the *Programme of action to advance responsible State behaviour in the use of ICTs in the context of international security*, which does indeed emphasize the essential nature of capacity-building, received support from some of the discussants during the conference.

Participants underlined that even as the discussion for a legally binding document could eventually begin, it is of foremost importance that all States are able to address risks and threats coming from the ICT environment. For this objective, capacity-building is key. Such capacities will also allow States to better participate at the bilateral, regional, and international levels. The example of El Salvador and its efforts to implement the 11 voluntarily norms of responsible States' use of ICTs was presented.

3.3 PANEL 2 – INTER-STATE COOPERATION AS A CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURE

Confidence-building measures can be effective tools to protect peace and security as they contribute to creating trust and transparency, and therefore reduce the risk of misperception and miscalculation, through sharing and exchange of information as well as through facilitating communication at the appropriate levels, for example through a dedicated directory of Points of Contact. What lessons can we learn from practices already existing in this field? What else can be done to promote confidence-building through inter-State cooperation?

Moderator: **Dr. Andraz Kastelic** (Researcher, Security and Technology Programme, UNIDIR)

Speakers:

- **Ms. Luo You Clarice Lim** (Counsellor, permanent Mission to the United Nations; Singapore)

- **Mr. Manuchehr Hojizoda** (Deputy Director of the Department of Humanitarian Cooperation, General Political and Social Problems, Executive Committee; Commonwealth of Independent States)

- **Ms. María Alejandra Costa Prieto** (Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva; Uruguay)

- **H.E. Sovann Ke** (Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission to the United Nations, New York; Cambodia)

The second panel focused on confidence-building measures (CBMs), investigating how they can be an effective tool for the promotion of trust, transparency, peace and security. In this panel, the speakers underlined the importance of increased inter-State cooperation in the present challenging geopolitical context. Investment in CBMs, so argued some panellists, helps to reduce risks of conflict and to reduce misperceptions.

An example of an existing and arguably effective CBM given by some speakers was the current OEWG, which provides a platform for meaningful inter-State dialogue, builds trust and seeks international convergence through seeking consensus on matters related to international ICT security, even when things are seemingly difficult.

Once again, the speakers emphasized the imperative character of capacity-building, potentially one of the most important enablers of effective CBMs. In this context, it has been stressed that States should possess a minimum capacity to be able to meaningfully engage in various forms of confidence-building measures.

Additionally, some speakers underlined the role of a global Points of Contact network and directory in the context of international ICT security, which is currently under discussion at the OEWG. The Points of Contact network could be an important CBM, facilitating communication between States and thus reducing the likelihood of misconceptions.

Speakers also shared good practices emerging from the existing CBMs at the regional level. The conference participants heard about various relevant activities aimed at confidence-building in the field of international ICT security, which have been ongoing in the contexts of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The conference participants learned about the relevant regional activities and frameworks such as OAS *Working group on cooperation and CBMs in cyberspace*, the ASEAN *Points of Contact network and Open-Ended Study Group on CBMs*, as well as about the *CIS 2019 Strategy for Cybersecurity*.

3.4 PANEL 3 – INTER-STATE COOPERATION AS AN ENABLER OF CAPACITY-BUILDING

Capacity-building is an important aspect of cooperation among States aimed at ensuring an open, secure, stable, accessible and peaceful ICT environment and a voluntary act of both the donor and the recipient. In the first progress report of the current OEWG, the value of South–South, South–North, triangular, and regionally focused cooperation was also recalled. What does this mean in practice? How do these different types of cooperation contribute concretely to capacity-building?

Moderator: **Dr. Cecile Aptel** (Deputy Director, UNIDIR)

Speakers:

- **Ms. Andrea Martin-Swaby** (Unit Head, Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Unit, Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions; Jamaica)

- **H.E. Mohammad Aamir Khan** (Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations, New York; Pakistan)

- **Dr. Nnenna Ifeanyi-Ajufo** (Vice Chair, African Union Cyber Security Experts Group; African Union)

- **H.E. Sohail Khan** (Deputy Secretary General; Shanghai Cooperation Organization)

The third panel discussed inter-State cooperation as an enabler of capacity-building and vice versa. Speakers elaborated on the importance of South–North, South–South and Triangular capacity–building. It has been emphasized that capacity-building needs to be not only targeted but also demand-driven in order to be effective in responding to the actual needs of developing countries and to yield the desired effects. To enable that, developing countries must first identify national cybersecurity capacity gaps. Panellists also stressed the need for tailored capacity-building activities, which should be adapted to the specific contexts of the recipient State(s) and which can only be achieved through active support of the local government.

In addition to being demand-driven and tailored, capacity-building must be apolitical and should not serve the political ends of the provider or donor. To promote capacity-building, which is currently underfunded, some panellists argued for the establishment of a dedicated international capacity-building fund, which would promote not only national cybersecurity capacities but also, more broadly, international ICT security.

A missing element of the international capacity-building efforts, argued some of the panellists, is the absence of a strategic, perhaps even centralized, approach to relevant endeavours. In addition to the aforementioned international fund, a number of other suggestions with the potential to alleviate this situation were voiced during the conference. Speakers suggested, inter alia, strengthening the function of the OEWG as a neutral, apolitical platform to promote capacity-building, enhancing cooperation between the Internet Governance Forum and the OEWG, and solidifying the role of regional organizations in managing capacity-building programmes. Some panellists also suggested that the International Telecommunication Union take on the task of mapping cybersecurity capacity-building efforts around the world.

An important distinction between technical assistance and capacity-building was also made during the third conference panel, with the latter being considered as the more sustainable process and the broader concept.

Before delivering closing remarks, **Dr. Giacomo Persi Paoli**, Head of the UNIDIR Security and Technology Programme, summarized the conference discussions.

4. CONCLUSION

The conference "Towards a More Stable and Secure ICT Environment: Unpacking Inter-State Cooperation" provided a platform for structured discussion on the operationalization of inter-State cooperation to the end of increasing stability in the ICT domain. The main points of convergence among the States contributing to the conference were as follows.

• Tackling the challenges of international ICT security requires inter-State cooperation.

• Inter-State cooperation for the benefit of a peaceful, secure, and stable international ICT environment does already exist on various levels and in different formats. However, in order to tackle the challenge of increasing "scope, scale, severity and sophistication"[1] of cyber threats, States should invest in intensifying their cooperative efforts.

• To increase inter-State cooperation, States should consider investing in capacity- and confidence-building efforts. Confidence-building efforts can increase effective inter-State cooperation. At the same time, capacity-building can facilitate inclusive and meaningful inter-State cooperation; regional organizations are uniquely positioned to facilitate tailored capacity-building efforts.

• There are a number of possible formats of future formal inter-State cooperation beyond existing multilateral processes. They include, in no particular order, the *Programme of action to advance responsible State behaviour in the use of ICTs in the context of international security*; a conference on a new legally binding instrument dedicated to international ICT security; and establishment of a new, third OEWG.

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1   General Assembly. Report of the Group of Governmental Experts on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace in the Context of International Security. UN document A/76/135 (14 July 2021), para 6

TOWARDS A MORE STABLE AND SECURE ICT ENVIRONMENT:
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This report provides a brief summary of the substantive discussions during the conference "Towards a More Stable and Secure ICT Environment: Unpacking Inter-State Cooperation", held in Geneva, 2 December 2022. The conference provided a platform for structured discussion among State representatives on good practices in the field of inter-State cooperation and the relevant confidence- and capacity-building measures for more peaceful and stable international ICT environment.

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