

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA)
Symposium Series on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in the
context of disarmament and international security

Session 1 Summary
22 April 2026

This meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule. Accordingly, this summary reflects the substance of the discussions without attribution. The views expressed are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations, UNODA, or its Secretariat.

Overview and Objectives

The United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs' Symposium Series on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures (TCBMs) in the context of disarmament and international security aims at strengthening dialogue with the global expert community at a moment of heightened geopolitical tension and growing risks of misperception and escalation.

The series convenes leading experts from academia, think tanks, regional organizations, and civil society to explore the foundations, evolution, and future directions of TCBMs across thematic and regional contexts. Through quarterly sessions, UNODA hopes to build a sustained network of practitioners and researchers, identify good practices and regional champions, draw lessons from historical and contemporary mechanisms, and generate forward-looking recommendations.

This inaugural session sought to establish a shared conceptual foundation by addressing what TCBMs are, how they have evolved, and why they are increasingly relevant today. The session featured presentations on the conceptual underpinning as well as UNODA's work on TCBMs. Experts discussed the growing relevance of the instruments amid rising challenges, offering nuanced reflections on the frameworks and approaches through which TCBMs can most effectively contribute to peace and security under current circumstances. Approximately 50 representatives from international and regional organizations, academia, think tanks, and civil society joined for a wide-ranging exchange under the Chatham House Rule.

The symposium series will consist of quarterly thematic discussions examining the historical evolution, current practice, and future prospects of TCBMs across regions and security domains.

Setting the Scene: Conceptual Foundations

The first session opened with two substantive presentations that framed the discussion. The first introduced the core purpose and role of TCBMs in international security and disarmament. TCBMs were described as enabling tools designed to reduce mistrust, fear,

and tension among States, reinforce confidence where it exists, and facilitate arms control and disarmament processes, including verification. A central point was that TCBMs are not substitutes for disarmament measures, but rather mechanisms part of the “disarmament toolbox” that help create the political and strategic conditions necessary for progress.

Several foundational concepts were clarified, including the distinction between TCBMs and “partial (arms control) measures.” While partial measures focus on concrete, step by step reductions in armaments, TCBMs aim to support broader disarmament objectives by fostering trust and predictability. The presentation also addressed the various forms TCBMs may take—multilateral, regional, bilateral, or unilateral—and their diverse legal character, which can range from legally binding commitments to politically binding arrangements or unilateral declarations. It was noted that sustained implementation of TCBMs can contribute to the development of international norms or customary international law. Importantly, while TCBMs can complement verification arrangements, they cannot replace formal verification mechanisms.

Historical Evolution and Key Lessons

The historical evolution of TCBMs within the UN system was reviewed to draw key lessons. Experience has shown that TCBMs tend to be most effective and durable when linked to broader disarmament processes or designed to support future agreements. Regular review mechanisms, adaptation, and avenues for State engagement were highlighted as critical to maintaining relevance, technical credibility, and political support over time.

UNODA’s Work on TCBMs Across Security Domains

The second presentation surveyed UNODA’s current work on TCBMs across conventional arms, biological weapons, nuclear risk reduction, ICT/cybersecurity, and regional arrangements. It highlighted how TCBMs are embedded in the UN peace and security architecture, including through recent references in the New Agenda for Peace, the Pact for the Future, and the Secretary General’s report “The Security We Need – Rebalancing Military Spending for a Sustainable and Peaceful Future.”

Key UN transparency instruments—the UN Register of Conventional Arms (UNROCA) and the UN Report on Military Expenditures (UNMilEx)—were reviewed as longstanding voluntary mechanisms to promote transparency and confidence. While reporting to these instruments has shown modest improvement in recent years, participation ultimately remains uneven, limiting their effectiveness. The UN repository of confidence building measures was presented as a reference platform that brings together widely recognized and tested TCBMs. The role of the UN Disarmament Commission was noted, particularly its contributions to developing practical CBMs in conventional weapons and recommendations for implementation of TCBMs in outer space activities. The Biological Weapons Convention was highlighted as an example of how CBMs can reduce ambiguity, strengthen implementation, and support peaceful cooperation, with participation in recent years reaching historic highs.

The briefing concluded with an overview of nuclear, ICT, and regional TCBMs. In the nuclear domain, Cold War era risk reduction measures—such as accident notifications, launch notifications, crisis communication channels, and data exchanges—were discussed alongside contemporary safeguards, verification arrangements, and review processes that continue to serve confidence building functions. In the ICT/cybersecurity domain, States have developed specific CBMs, including the establishment of a points of contact directory, to reduce risks of misperception and escalation emanating from ICT use. The importance of regional approaches was emphasized, with UNODA regional centres supporting context specific, voluntary measures that complement global instruments.

Despite these examples, the session underscored that TCBMs generally remain underutilized, prompting reflection on the underlying reasons, including the erosion of trust and heightened political tensions, capacity constraints and reporting fatigue in the case of the UN transparency instruments, among others.

Growing Relevance Amid Rising Challenges

Participants agreed that TCBMs have a long and successful history, yet face heightened challenges today. While their importance has arguably never been greater, effective implementation has become more difficult amid strained geopolitical relations, weakened multilateralism, and increasingly complex security environments involving multiple actors, domains, and deterrence dynamics. Several participants emphasized that dialogue is often limited, prospects for legally binding agreements are remote, and political polarization constrains cooperation.

UN transparency instruments

A recurring theme was the need to assess the added value of existing UN transparency instruments with a view to reinvigorating them. Persistent political, technical, and capacity related constraints continue to limit participation, while the growing availability of nationally published military data—particularly on military expenditures—raises questions about whether some instruments remain fit for purpose. Participants highlighted the importance of adapting existing mechanisms, updating their scope and function, and ensuring they remain relevant as confidence building tools in an evolving information environment.

Additional perspectives highlighted the value of data, noting that information contained in UN transparency instruments databases can support research, policy analysis, and compliance efforts beyond traditional confidence building objectives. Reference was made to UN Comtrade as a complementary transparency resource for understanding arms transfer trends.

TCBMs at regional level

Regional experiences featured prominently in the discussion. The Inter American system was cited as an example of how TCBMs can remain relevant by evolving over time through regular review and expansion. Since their adoption in the early 1990s, CBMs in the Americas have moved beyond traditional measures—such as arms transfers, military expenditures, and exercises—to include non-traditional measures tailored to regional realities, including humanitarian assistance, disaster response, demining, cyberspace, women, peace and security, and cooperation against organized crime. However, challenges remain, particularly with underreporting: States often implement CBMs at bilateral or multilateral levels without formally reporting on them, undermining transparency and effectiveness.

African perspectives demonstrated that while TCBMs are unevenly institutionalized at the continental level, sub regional and technical mechanisms have enabled meaningful cooperation, even where political relations are strained, underscoring the UN’s role as a neutral convener.

From a European perspective, participants noted that TCBMs can be politically sensitive. Some suggested conceptualizing transparency not only as a confidence building tool but also as a mechanism for managing distrust and enhancing predictability. Within the regional context, this approach could offer a potentially constructive way to reintroduce transparency into contemporary security debates.

Participants debated whether TCBMs should be activated only in specific circumstances or implemented continuously. It was highlighted that, where the environment is not currently conducive to international or multilateral efforts, regional TCBMs may offer a more feasible approach, as they can be more easily tailored to the specific context. Regional experience suggested that TCBMs are most effective when treated as permanent mechanisms rather than crisis response tools, helping to preserve communication channels and a baseline of trust before tensions escalate.

Mistrust, Accountability, and Dialogue

The discussion also addressed the broader challenge of mistrust. Participants cautioned that while accountability is essential, an excessive focus on blame can paralyze dialogue and hinder progress on practical confidence building measures. Some suggested that the current environment may require a shift in emphasis from “confidence building” to “confidence restoring” measures. In this context, technical and expert level engagement was seen as especially valuable, as it can sustain cooperation even when high level political agreement is unlikely. Multilateral fora were highlighted as important venues for maintaining dialogue, where the act of reaching agreement, itself can have trust restoring value.

Political and Legally Binding Measures

The relationship between political and legally binding measures was revisited. While earlier generations of TCBMs benefited from being linked to broader legal architectures, current conditions may require political CBMs to function more independently. At the same time, participants stressed that such measures should remain supplementary and not become substitutes for arms control or disarmament commitments.

Conclusion

The session highlighted that TCBMs remain essential tools for advancing international peace and security, while underscoring the need for continued adaptation to today's complex and evolving security challenges. Key themes included the importance of balancing accountability with pragmatic engagement, sustaining dialogue through technical and regional mechanisms, updating conceptual approaches to address deepening mistrust, and rethinking transparency in response to shifting security dynamics. The exchange also reinforced the value of the symposium series as a space for open, informed reflection and helped lay the groundwork for more focused thematic discussions in future sessions.

The second session of the Symposium series, tentatively scheduled for late June, will focus on military transparency, conventional arms, and the international arms trade, building on the themes and discussions introduced during the inaugural session.