

Statement to the 73rd Session of the General Assembly First Committee – Space Security

Chair,

This year marks the beginning of the seventh decade of the space age, and the sixth decade since the entry into force of the Outer Space Treaty—the bedrock of international space law. Outer space now provides vast social, scientific and economic benefits to humanity. But the sustainability of this critical domain faces critical challenges.

The multifaceted challenges related to outer space activities require attention on numerous fronts, and at different venues. As we are addressing the UNGA First Committee on Disarmament and International Security, we wish to draw attention to the urgent need to engage in policy discussions and legal instruments specifically related to space arms control.

No clear norms are in place today to prevent an arms race in outer space. The risks associated with this prospect may not be apparent during peace time, when nations exercise self-restraint. But self-restraint is no substitute for effective governance, codified into international law.

In the past decade alone, ground-based anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) have been tested; satellites have been deliberately jammed; missile defense systems have been used as ASATs; and precursor technologies that would allow space-to-space offensive capabilities have been developed. Now we are hearing rhetoric from spacefaring nations about space as a warfighting domain, and even about an armed force for outer space, whose implications remain to be seen.

The United Nations General Assembly has voted for several years on a resolution on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS), which notably states that the “prevention of an arms race in outer space would avert a grave danger for international peace and security;” and that, “the legal regime applicable to outer space does not in and of itself guarantee the prevention of an arms race in outer space.”

However, the Conference on Disarmament, which has the primary responsibility for PAROS, has been unable to conduct any substantive negotiations for more than two decades. And any attempts to discuss arms controls at the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) are dismissed as falling outside its jurisdiction. This reality makes the work of this Committee all the more important.

We urge states to:

1. Pledge not to use any space- or ground-based capabilities to deliberately damage or destroy space assets.

2. Indicate support for the negotiation of a treaty preventing an arms race in outer space, and for interim transparency and confidence-building measures toward that end.
3. Refrain from developing and deploying space-based weapons or weapons that target space-based assets, including antisatellite technologies.
4. Highlight the importance of preventing the weaponisation of outer space to preserve international peace and security and benefit all humanity.

It is true that there has been no overt conflict in space thus far. But worrying signs, both in rhetoric and action, cannot be ignored. The fact that warfighting in space has not yet materialized is no reason for complacency. Quite the contrary, it provides the international community a rare opportunity to be proactive.

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The OST was explicit that the use of space must be for “peaceful purposes” and “for the benefit and in the interests of all countries”. These brief remarks are hardly sufficient to enumerate the increasing benefits of outer space—or the many ways in which those benefits would be jeopardized in a weaponized space domain.

But it is imperative for this committee to take note of the dire risks inherent to the normalization of conflict on outer space, and to have the wisdom, the foresight, and the audacity to prevent an arms race in outer space before it is too late.

Delivered by Cesar Jaramillo -- Project Ploughshares, SEHLAC Network.

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