Towards a Comprehensive Assessment of Space Security: Civil society statement on outer space

United Nations General Assembly First Committee on Disarmament and International Security
26 October 2007

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Mr. Chairman,

On behalf of civil society everywhere, I'd like to thank you, the Secretariat and the delegations to the First Committee for dedicating some time of your debate to hear the perspectives from those you serve, the peoples of this planet for whom the United Nations was created to save from the scourge of war. In disarmament matters in particular, civil society has had to struggle many years for such a platform, and we are honored to be those civil society representatives here today.

I will not waste our precious minutes listing the copious—and growing—number of ways that humanity relies on outer space. Every person in this room understands that space technology guides our daily lives. The Chairman of the Committee on Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), Mr. Gerard Brachet, delivered a very thorough presentation in this hall just the other day, where he effectively outlined some of these critical civilian space applications, including weather tracking, global communication, and disaster management such as that which was required in the post-Katrina catastrophe. I'm sorry to add that, during these dangerous times of climate change, this latter use may be all the more necessary.

Further, all of us here are fully aware of the very serious risks posed by our increasing reliance on space. Currently, there are approximately 11,000 objects of space debris larger than 10 cm orbiting the earth, according to NASA.[i] A single piece of debris—either from a discarded peaceful rocket or from an irresponsible weapon test—could knock out a satellite and cause serious disruptions, at the very least.[ii] If we do not act to prevent the weaponization of space, the testing of such space-bound weapons will increase this "space junk" exponentially. Moreover, the weaponization of space—however soon that may come—presents much graver consequences for life on Earth, beyond just these issues of garbage.

Thus, there are two pressing issues regarding our common space security which need prompt attention:

1. Preventing space debris from adversely affecting the present and future uses of space and;
2. Preventing an arms race in space.

What we must do now is seriously debate and agree upon the best way by which we, as the international community, can strengthen our cooperation in space, the beloved "final frontier" that has grasped our imagination and wonder for generations.

Some advocate, as a quick fix, a "rules of the road" approach. Several experts such as Michael Krepon of the Henry Stimson Center have proposed a Code of Conduct be promptly instituted that could include provisions to:

- Minimize satellite-killing debris in space;
- Avoid and reduce the risk of collisions in space;
- Avoid or announce in advance dangerous maneuvers in space;
- Create special caution areas around satellites; and
- Cooperate on space traffic management.

In this same vein, the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee of COPUOS adopted space debris mitigation guidelines earlier this year, which have been submitted to the GA Fourth Committee this week. These guidelines, much like the rules of the road outlined by the Stimson Center, are meant to be voluntary rather than legally-binding, to be adopted through national mechanisms "to the greatest extent feasible."[iii]

Through such non-legally binding, voluntary measures, we can circumvent some of the issues that have mired space security discussions in the past, such as definitional issues (i.e., how to define a space weapon when a dislodged bolt from an old satellite can destroy a space object just as effectively as a space mine) or lengthy negotiations followed by difficult and elusive ratification processes.

However, by avoiding the difficult discussions on definitions, or failing to explore effective verification mechanisms for ensured compliance, we also avoid addressing the threat of an arms race in space.

The deployment of weapons in space or terrestrially-based anti-satellite weapons will adversely and immediately affect the cooperative security foundation of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and possibly the very foundation of the UN system itself. Unilateral weaponization of space will degrade the very cooperation needed to address nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, to protect the climate and to solve problems of terrorism and poverty. Failure to cooperate in the heavens will destroy our ability to cooperate on Earth.

Moreover, as if war on Earth wasn't catastrophic enough, imagine if one country blinds a nuclear-armed country during conflict, by knocking out their satellites and "blinding" the commanders to what is happening in the combat zone. That, according to retired US Ambassador Robert Grey, is "when the finger on the nuclear button gets itchy." With such unimaginable consequences, we must make the most serious efforts possible to prevent space from becoming another theater of war.

How then, to proceed? The WMD Commission had recommended a Review Conference of the Outer Space Treaty. Russia and some partners are pushing for a brand new treaty, the often mentioned though yet-to-be-publicly-released "PPWT", the Prevention of Placement of Weapons in Outer Space Treaty. Well, we missed the 40th anniversary of the OST, the occasion on which Dr. Blix and his fellow commissioners had hoped would be utilized for a Review Conference, and a wholly separate treaty will certainly be rejected at this time; many states will be dubious of a treaty that lacks verification—as the PPWT is rumored to be—and the US for the time being rejects any and all new treaties regarding outer space, as asserted in their 2006 National Space Policy.

Therefore, we believe that the most useful step that we can take now—not in 2008, not in another 10 years and another OST anniversary, but now—can be found in the report of the Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, which had suggested that Secretary-General Ban convene, at the earliest possible time, a high-level expert panel.[iv] Its mandate will include analyzing the present uses, threats, risks and opportunities presented by humanity's proliferating space capabilities, both military and civilian, taking into account

space-related developments, achievements and challenges that have arisen since the OST's inception, and making recommendations regarding the most effective way forward. Drawing from expert scientific, political, military and legal analyses, the panel would contribute immensely toward facilitating a global consensus on the sticky issues such as definitions and verifiability, laying the necessary foundation for real movement when the political climate is ripe, thereby possibly expediting the lengthy negotiation process of a new treaty.

At present, no forum exists for the international community to comprehensively examine outer space security. COPUOS's mandate is limited to peaceful uses. The CD is stuck in its own self-perpetuating quagmire of inaction. And is any multilateral forum, whether in Vienna, Geneva or New York, soliciting the perspectives or communicating effectively and continually with the increasing number of commercial actors in space? With such limited communication and an absolute dearth of a convergence of relevant perspectives and analyses, we are unable to address the very serious threats we face; the security of our heavens and those of us that live beneath them, remain at risk. We urge your support of this suggestion of the Secretary-General's Advisory Board and your voicing such support in either inclusion in a resolution or letters in support to the Secretariat.[v]

Mr. Chairman,

We have before us an unprecedented opportunity. Having survived the cold war nuclear arms race, and with a burgeoning framework of cooperative security like none the world has ever seen, we are capable of undertaking conflict prevention measures in the highest of places. With a cooperative framework firmly in place and, bolstered by our exponentially advancing technological abilities, together, we will be able to explore and utilize the firmaments, in previously unimaginable ways, truly benefiting all humankind.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[i] NASA, Orbital Debris Program Office: http://www.orbitaldebris.jsc.nasa.gov. Also cited in Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms, report of the Weapons of Mass

Destruction Commission, 2006: p.147. See: www.wmdcommission.org.

[ii] In May of 1998**,** a Galaxy IV satellite failed. Eighty percent of US pagers went blank, 37 million people were immediately affected, some radio and television stations went off the air, and some gas stations and retail stores could not validate credit card transactions. Imagine the consequences of a robust anti-satellite test program or a dedicated organized attack on space assets. Imagine if we do nothing to prevent further space debris.

[iii] COPUOS adopted seven guidelines:

1. Limit debris released during normal operations;
2. Minimize the potential for break-ups during operational phases;
3. Limit the probability of accidental collision in orbit;
4. Avoid intentional destruction and other harmful activities;
5. Minimize potential for post-mission break-ups resulting from stored energy;
6. Limit the long-term presence of spacecraft and launch vehicle orbital stages in the low-Earth orbit (LEO) region after the end of their mission; and
7. Limit the long-term interference of spacecraft and launch vehicle orbital stages with the geosynchronous Earth orbit (GEO) region after the end of their mission.

[iv] This recommendation is similar to the provision included in recommendation #45 of the WMD Commission report, which calls for states to "set up a group of experts to develop options for monitoring and verifying various components of a space security regime and a code of conduct, designed *inter alia* to prohibit the testing or deployment of space weapons." See WMD Commission report, p. 148.

[v] Should the CD agree on a programme of work, such a high-level panel would still be useful, in that it would be more comprehensive and be able to solicit a much wider range of views than the CD currently allows for, including those from civil society and the private sector. Further, depending on the modalities of the panel, it is possible that the panelists would be ostensibly free from national interest constraints and rather act independently, in the manner of the WMD Commission.