

Joint Civil Society Statement on Outer Space, 2024
United Nations First Committee on Disarmament and International Security

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Space is vital to the well-being of every civilian on Earth, and our dependence on it grows daily. During this year's Summit of the Future, the United Nations reaffirmed that the Outer Space Treaty must be recognized as the cornerstone for the international legal regime governing outer space activities, which is essential for maintaining peace. Yet, despite decades of efforts to maintain outer space as a peaceful domain, the threat of an arms race and armed conflict in space looms, putting us all at risk.

We know that harmful interference with satellites – including the jamming of satellite communications, dazzling of their sensors, and cyber-attacks, with the aim of disrupting their normal functioning – is becoming more frequent and dangerous as illustrated by events across the Middle East and Europe over the last year. We have witnessed states demonstrate destructive anti-satellite missile capabilities using ground-based weapons systems numerous times, most recently in 2021. There is evidence that the development of other anti-satellite capabilities such as directed energy weapons – including those based in space – is accelerating at an alarming pace. And fears that states could deploy nuclear weapons in orbit have resurfaced.

Many other space technologies and activities with the potential to be both helpful and harmful are advancing, widening risk of misunderstandings, misperceptions, and miscalculations, as well as the potential that they will be used for harmful purposes.

Whether intentional or not, war in space would devastate life on Earth for generations to come. It risks long-lasting contamination of an already-fragile outer space environment on which all of humanity depends. And it has the potential to spark conflict – even nuclear war – here on Earth.

Even actions short of destructive actions could be catastrophic for some. The consequences of disrupting systems that underpin essential civilian services—even temporarily—could be catastrophic, even for nations not involved in the conflict. These systems connect remote communities, monitor and mitigate climate change, provide early-warning and disaster management, support emergency response, sustain energy infrastructure, and enable government functions.

But progress on the prevention of an arms race in outer space, or PAROS, is also evident. Support for this effort is unanimous at this Committee, as is the need to implement transparency and confidence-building measures. Political commitments not to conduct

destructive tests of direct-ascent anti-satellite weapons, and not to be the first to place weapons in space, are gaining momentum. Earlier this year a Group of Governmental Experts on Further Practical Measures for PAROS concluded with a consensus report outlining a comprehensive approach to space threats that includes a need for both legal and non-legal measures.

As expressed in the Pact for the Future, our expanding reliance and use of outer space demands urgent action. It's critical that the international community continue to move forward on these efforts, through a unified approach.

To do so, First Committee delegations should:

- Support efforts to ensure that the planned, parallel open-ended working groups focused on norms of behaviour and a legally-binding agreement are combined or coordinated to create a comprehensive, results-oriented process that is open and inclusive for all stakeholders;
- Reiterate that the use of outer space is intended for the benefit and interests of all, and the importance of preventing an arms race and escalation of armed conflict in space;
- Reaffirm the legal prohibition against the placement or use of any and all weapons of mass destruction in outer space, and commit not to develop capabilities for such purpose;
- Condemn ASAT tests and the deployment or use of weapons in orbit or other capabilities used to disrupt, destroy, damage, or disable objects in space and commit not to do so;
- Emphasize the environmental and humanitarian consequences of harmful activities against space systems;
- Champion the importance of gender, racial, geographic, and other forms of diversity in discussions on PAROS and the need to assess the possible differentiated impacts of an arms race or armed conflict in outer space on different peoples;
- Acknowledge the value of transparency and contributions of civil society inclusion in official proceedings.

But action is also needed beyond this committee. Domestically, states should:

- Not develop or deploy capabilities for use as weapons in outer space or against space systems,
- Commit to refraining from conducting destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile tests, as outlined in UNGA Resolution 77/41,
- Refrain from activities that deliberately damage or destroy space objects, or that interfere with essential civilian infrastructure and services.
- Take steps to ensure that adherence with political commitments is observable to others;
- Implement the recommendations on TCBMs adopted by the UN Disarmament Commission and the 2013 Group of Governmental Experts;

- Demonstrate best practices by using the cooperative provisions of the OST such as consultation, observation, and information exchange to address perceived space threats and resolve uncertainties;
- Adopt or support unilateral measures of restraint as a step toward new arms control measures in outer space, such as the moratorium on destructive tests of ground-based, direct-ascent anti-satellite capabilities, and credible commitments not to place weapons in outer space;
- Speak out against and clearly recognize violations of treaty and other legal obligations;
- Work constructively to establish the foundations that give practical effect to both multilateral and unilateral commitments, such as common understandings of threats and key terms, and means of verification and compliance; and
- Adopt national legislation and regulations to make space activities consistent with international law, norms, and voluntary commitments.

The pursuit of effective governance of space has faced considerable challenges with rapid development of new technologies posing a significant hurdle. As stated by Madam Chair, Maritza Chan, “peace is possible, though it often requires a thousand attempts.”

Signatories:

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