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Agenda Item 5: Ways and Means of Maintaining Space for Peaceful Purposes

UK Statement

As this is the first time my delegation is taking the floor, let me first thank you, Chair, for your leadership during the session. I would also like to thank UNOOSA Director, Niklas Hedman, and the wider UNOOSA team for their work to facilitate the session.

Mr Chair,

The pace of human exploration and use of outer space is accelerating.

We are seeing exponential growth in the number of satellites placed in orbit.

The number of space-faring nations continues to grow.

Humanity is on the cusp of returning humans to the Moon and establishing a permanent presence there. The utilisation of the mineral resources in space will not be far behind.

Modern technologies are enabling novel space activities, which have previously been impossible. These include in-orbit servicing and manufacturing, debris removal and new ways of delivering existing services such as communications and position, navigation and timing.

On the horizon we begin to see the emergence of potentially game-changing technologies such as space-based solar power.

Mr Chair,

These human endeavours in space bring significant opportunities to increase our knowledge, grow our economies, serve our societies, and protect our planet.

But they also bring risks and threats. The activities and technologies I have described will be fields of both cooperation and competition. The competition between States that we see on Earth is also present in space and looks set to intensify in the coming years.

Mr Chair,

The UN has a vital role to play in encouraging cooperation and ensuring that competition in space does not escalate into conflict, which would harm the interests of all States.

As a minimum, States must comply with their obligations under the Outer Space Treaty and international law, including the Charter of the United Nations, which applies to outer space and is applicable to all activities of states including those relating to the exploration and use of outer space. This is essential to maintaining international peace, security and stability and promoting an open, secure, stable, accessible, sustainable and peaceful use of space.

But the UN must also respond to new developments that challenge the maintenance of space for peaceful purposes. Distinct parts of the UN system can and should contribute to this task within their own respective mandates.

Some progress is being made.

We welcome the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution 77/41 in 2022, which calls on States to commit not to conduct destructive direct ascent anti-satellite missile tests, which are destabilising and damaging to the space environment. The UK has made such a commitment and we call on other states, whether they possess such capabilities or not, to follow suit.

It is entirely appropriate that this resolution came through the UN First Committee on Disarmament and International Security. It shows that efforts to strengthen international peace and security can also benefit safety and sustainability thus complementing the work of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.

We also welcome the UN Disarmament Commission's recent adoption of recommendations for the implementation of transparency and confidence building measures in outer space activities, which have a significant role to play in maintaining space for peaceful purposes. If States are as transparent as possible about their intentions, capabilities, doctrine, and policies it can help to improve mutual understanding, build trust, and reduce risks of miscalculation and conflict.

The UN Open-Ended Working Group on responsible space behaviours is also making a valuable contribution to the UN's agenda on prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS). States have presented many interesting ideas for new norms, rules, and principles of responsible behaviours to reduce threats to space systems. We hope States will continue to work constructively to bring the Group to a consensus conclusion in August this year.

The responsible space behaviours initiative is rightly the preserve of the UN First Committee. But the work of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space also contributes to improving space security. For example, general standards and guidelines for safety or sustainability for space operations agreed by the Committee makes it easier to identify irresponsible or threatening behaviour, which may deviate from these standards.

The Committee should also encourage transparency in the testing and use of dual use capabilities such as those to remove debris from orbit. The UK has provided detailed information to this body about its efforts to develop such capabilities and we encourage others to do the same.

Thank you, Mr Chair.