

United States Statement

Agenda Item 6 – Ways and means of maintaining outer space for peaceful purposes

June 20, 2024

Chair, in the year since this Committee last addressed this topic, there have been a number of significant and troubling developments with regard to the peaceful uses of outer space.

Today, the system of international laws and norms that have enabled humanity to explore and use outer space for the past six decades faces new challenges. This is why the United States has urged the international community to take stock of current and emerging threats and, more importantly, commit to addressing them.

With regard to such threats, the United States is extremely concerned that one Member State may be considering the incorporation of nuclear weapons into its counterspace programs. If placed in orbit, this capability would violate the Outer Space Treaty, the cornerstone of international law in outer space and the most celebrated achievement of this Committee.

In April, this same Member State vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that reaffirmed the longstanding, clear, and fundamental obligation of States Parties under the Outer Space Treaty to “not place in orbit around the Earth any objects carrying nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction” in accordance with Article IV of the Treaty.

As we heard yesterday, the head of this nation’s delegation to this Committee stated that his country had no intention of placing nuclear weapons in space. If that were the case, this nation would not have vetoed the Security Council resolution and would not be pursuing such a capability.

The mandate of this Committee is to promote international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space. However, we here in Vienna cannot turn a blind eye to this severe challenge to international law and the sustainability, safety, stability, and security of the outer space domain. We firmly reject the mischaracterization that it is some “trick” or “prank” for many delegations to note their concerns about this specific challenge at this Committee session.

Chair, in the face of such challenges, one of the key means of maintaining outer space for peaceful purposes, depends upon the respect for international law. We call on all States Parties to the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 to commit to upholding their international obligations under this treaty.

We also encourage all members of this Committee — as well as all other UN Member States — who have not yet become parties to the Outer Space Treaty to both accede to this treaty and implement its provisions.

Accession to and compliance with the Outer Space Treaty would be a clear and unmistakable contribution to the prevention of an arms race in outer space and promoting international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space.

On this foundation of the Outer Space Treaty, there remains strong global consensus in this committee and in the broader United Nations system. As Ambassador Dennis Francis, the President of the 78th session of the General Assembly, declared during the Assembly's May 6 meeting, "Outer space does not belong to individual nations. Its peaceful and sustainable use is not subject to national appropriation and must be a place of peace and cooperation for the benefit and in the interest of all countries."

The United States could not agree more.

Chair, the United States recognizes there are distinct and complementary efforts in this Committee and UN disarmament fora -- including the Conference on Disarmament, the Disarmament Commission, and the First Committee of the General Assembly. These mandates also do not prejudice the specific and distinct role of the Security Council regarding the maintenance of international peace and security in outer space.

The United States will continue to raise space security concerns in disarmament and international security fora, as they are the best suited venues to address such threats.

We also note that the deliberations on certain space-related activities in governing bodies of UN specialized agencies, such as the International Telecommunication Union and the World Meteorological Organization, can have implications for both this Committee and discussions in disarmament and international security fora.

Chair, as we acknowledge the distinct mandates of elements in the UN system, the United States again notes that some Committee efforts, such as the guidelines for orbital debris mitigation and long-term sustainability of outer space activities, complement and contribute to enhancing space security and stability.

Similarly, we note several efforts in disarmament and security fora which complement the efforts within this Committee. These include:

- General Assembly Resolution 77/41, which calls on all States to commit not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile tests. I am pleased to say that a total of 38 States have now made national commitments to avoid this intentional and irresponsible hazard to spaceflight safety.
- General Assembly resolution 78/20, which establishes a second Open Ended Working Group (OEWG) on “Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours.”

Chair, the United States urges all members of COPUOS to participate constructively in the second OEWG when it convenes next year in Geneva. As a large group of participating States noted last year at the first OEWG, this forum has proven itself and supported the continuation of a norms-based approach.

In particular, the second OEWG can address such questions as:

- Intentional damage to and destruction of space systems;
- Threats to the safe operation of space objects;
- Rendezvous operations and proximity operations that could increase the risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation; and
- Protecting critical space-based services to civilians as well as services that support humanitarian operations.

We also note that the second OEWG’s mandate allows for States to discuss “other activities and measures that could reduce the risk of unintended escalation and conflict.” This, along with ongoing discussions at the Conference on Disarmament, could serve as a more appropriate forum for substantive discussions on issues related to national security use of non-governmental space capabilities that some delegations have raised this year in this Committee and its Subcommittees.

Chair, underscoring the importance of both complementary discussions in other fora and these recent developments, the United States looks forward to a constructive set of outcomes from the Summit of the Future this September as well as the fifth joint panel discussion of the General Assembly's First and Fourth Committees on "possible challenges to space security and sustainability" in October. In particular, the United States believes these deliberations in New York can improve awareness of complementary efforts across the UN system, which can build upon the consensus-based work here in Vienna.

Finally, as the General Assembly noted in resolution 76/3, this Committee and its subcommittees — supported by the Office for Outer Space Affairs — are unique platforms for international cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes, for the global governance of outer space activities, consistent with international law, for developing international space law, for fostering dialogue among spacefaring and emerging space nations, and for promoting the increased involvement of all countries in space activities, including through capacity-building initiatives.

In carrying out its mandate for international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space, this Committee advances both universalization of the four core space treaties, as well as voluntary, non-legally binding best practices and guidelines for the full range of governmental and non-governmental space activities conducted for peaceful purposes and for the benefit and in the interests of all countries.

To this end, the United States will continue to uphold and advocate for this Committee's position as the premiere venue for the promotion of international space cooperation and the study of related legal issues toward the maintenance of the peaceful uses of outer space.