
Outer space

Reaching Critical Will

Background

Concern with space security issues is driven by numerous factors such as economic growth, communication, trade, climate change, and development. Outer space is a global commons and as our dependency on outer space assets grow, it is becoming increasingly important to address the issue of safety and security in order to preserve this unique environment so it can be used by all for a long time to come.

The increase in space activities has amplified the risk of collisions that create enormous amounts of debris, which can have devastating effects. The increase of debris in space itself increases the risk of collisions with operational space crafts and radio frequency interference. The average impact speed of orbital debris with another space object is close to 10 km/s, meaning a collision with even a small piece of debris will cause severe damage. Today more than 21,000 pieces of debris are being tracked in the orbit around earth. However, since only pieces larger than 10 cm can be traced, the number of actual debris is impossible to estimate.

Development of satellites and other technologies dedicated to military purposes has also increased. Some satellites that can be used for telecommunications and earth observation can be and sometimes are used for military purposes, leading to a militarisation of outer space. There have been some worrying trends in technology

development in recent years indicating that the weaponisation of space technology is no longer just science fiction. Some states, such as the United States and China, have developed and even tested anti-satellite systems. Some ground-based “missile defence” technologies also have dual-use capabilities as space weapons, as they can be used to attack space-based assets.

This makes it more important than ever to protect space against weaponisation, militarisation, and irresponsible behaviour. A conflict in space would lead to devastating consequences for our daily life on earth and also affect the overall long-term sustainability and peaceful use of space. This significant increase of space activities has meant that the continued absence of a solid regime of rules in space could potentially harm the future of our space endeavours, no matter what country you are from.

Current context

The overwhelming majority of UN member states are concerned that the weaponisation of outer space will lead to an arms race and believe that a multilateral approach is the best way to prevent this. A number of new initiatives have taken off in recent years, including the Committee on the Peaceful Use of Outer Space (COPUOS) debris mitigation guidelines, the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on transparency and confidence-building measures

in outer space, the EU International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities, and Russia and China's draft treaty on the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS) in the Conference on Disarmament.

None of these efforts have yet managed to achieve the results needed. While negotiation of an instrument on PAROS has been on the CD's agenda for decades, the US government has prevented negotiations from beginning on that issue. The other initiatives, while important for increasing transparency and confidence amongst states in terms of practice and policy, cannot replace a legally-binding instrument preventing the weaponisation of outer space. In the meantime, money is being spent to develop technologies that could disrupt and destroy our use of outer space now and for future generations.

Recommendations for governments

During First Committee:

- Delegations should highlight the importance of preventing the weaponisation of outer space to preserve international peace and security and benefit all humankind.

- They should condemn any anti-satellite tests and the development of weapons to be placed in orbit or to be used to target space-based assets.
- They should welcome the outcome of the latest GGE on transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space and report on their implementation of measures recommended by the GGE and the COPUOS debris mitigation guidelines.
- They should indicate support for the negotiation of a treaty preventing an arms race in outer space and for interim measures such as the International Code of Conduct on outer space activities.

Beyond First Committee:

- States should begin negotiations on a legally-binding instrument to prevent the weaponisation of outer space.
- States should refrain from developing and deploying space-based weapons or weapons that target space-based assets, including anti-satellite technologies.
- States should work to enhance synergies and cooperation between First Committee and other relevant UN bodies working on outer space security issues.



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