Statement by the
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United Nations General Assembly
Delivered in the Debate on Outer Space (Disarmament Aspects) of the
General Assembly’s First Committee
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Mr. Chairman, the United States is pleased to inform the General Assembly’s First Committee that efforts to promote international cooperation and understanding in the peaceful use of outer space continue to expand. Such cooperation is essential today more than ever as space is evolves into an increasingly congested, complex, and potentially contested, domain. As we begin to address these emerging challenges, the United States will continue to take an active role in identifying and implementing cooperative efforts with established and emerging members of the international spacefaring community to ensure the safety of the space assets of all nations.

For the United States and many other nations, the information collected and relayed by space systems makes essential contributions to scientific discovery, economic prosperity, and the interests of maintaining international peace and security. To protect assets in this domain, the United States will expand cooperation with other like-minded spacefaring nations and with the private sector to identify and protect against intentional and unintentional threats to its space capabilities.

Perhaps the most telling illustration of the need for such cooperation came earlier this year, when a privately operated Iridium communications satellite collided on February 10 with an inactive Russian military satellite. In addition to the direct economic impact resulting from a loss of capabilities, the debris generated from this collision adds to the overall level of hazard in low Earth orbit.

As a leading spacefaring nation, the United States takes these issues very seriously. The United States has been, and will continue to be, active in identifying potential hazards and is pursuing new initiatives to preserve safety of flight for both human and robotic space missions.

Last winter’s collision also highlights the need to improve shared space situational awareness. As part of an effort to prevent future collisions, the United States has expanded the number of satellites that it monitors for risk of
collision with other satellites and space debris. In addition, the United States is providing notification to other government and commercial satellite operators when U.S. space analysts assess that one operator’s satellite is predicted to pass within a close distance of another spacecraft or space debris.

Mr. Chairman, last February’s collision emphasizes the vital importance of cooperation between governments as well as with industry in order to improve space safety. The United States was in communication with the Russian Federation promptly following the February collision, which was itself a demonstration of a valuable transparency and confidence-building measure.

Four months after the collision, experts from the United States and the Russian Federation met in Vienna to discuss the incident and to commence discussions on opportunities for new bilateral space transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs).

The United States also provided a presentation to the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) on the collision and its implications. In this presentation, the United States noted that this incident serves as an important reminder of the need for international cooperation with other spacefaring nations on measures to ensure the long-term sustainability of operations in the space environment.

As Russia – the State Party owner of the inactive military satellite involved in this collision – has noted, this unfortunate incident demonstrates the importance of forecasting dangerous space incidents and providing early warning as a confidence-building measure. Such cooperation can occur most rapidly on the bilateral level through practical measures involving military space operators.

In this regard, the United States welcomes Russia’s willingness to view this collision as a “teachable moment.” The United States also looks forward to the commencement of diplomatic and military space exchanges with Russia in 2010. Concrete actions – such as dialogues on national security space policies and strategies, expert visits to military satellite flight control centers, and discussions on mechanisms for exchanges of information on natural and debris hazards – can help raise practical cooperation to a new level. They also can only deepen mutual understanding between our respective armed forces.

However, outer space is no longer just an issue for the first two spacefaring nations. An increasing number of other nations are pursuing defense and
intelligence-related activities in outer space in support of their own national interests. As a result, the United States sees the "fresh start" in pragmatic discussions on space security with Russia as just one element of a broader framework of diplomatic, scientific, commercial, and military-to-military engagements with a number of countries.

In particular, the United States will seek to engage China in discussions to achieve mutual reassurance in the space domain. China, like any nation, has the right to provide for its security using space systems. However, China's increasing counter-space capabilities -- including continued development of direct-ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) interceptors, lasers, high-powered microwaves and particle beam weapons -- contrasts sharply with Chinese President Hu's desire to pursue a path of peaceful development and "win-win progress."

The resumption of high-level military-to-military dialogues between the United States and China is a positive step, but expanding this relationship to include focused discussions on space activities would increase transparency and help clarify China's intentions, strategy, and doctrine regarding the use of space for military purposes. Such clarification is one step towards reassuring the rest of the world that China's development and growing global role will not come at the expense of the well-being of others.

In addition to exploring ways to highlight and reinforce the areas of common interest, discussions of space security must address the source of mistrust directly. In particular, China must provide greater transparency regarding its intentions for the development, testing, and deployment of direct-ascent ASAT weapons and other elements of its multi-dimensional counter-space program.

Many spacefaring nations and commercial operators continue to face unnecessary hazards resulting from the orbital debris created by China's ASAT weapon flight-test in January 2007. This test created a pervasive debris cloud of more than 150,000 objects greater than 1 centimeter in size. U.S. experts estimate that many of the objects in this cloud -- which accounts for more than 25 percent of all cataloged objects in low earth orbit -- will stay in orbit for decades, and some for more than a century.

The United States believes that any decision by the Peoples Republic of China to conduct another intentionally-destructive ASAT weapon test in space would further undermine the credibility of the PRC's declaratory statements regarding
its condemnation of the so-called “weaponization of space.” It also would raise new questions about China’s commitment both to act responsibly in space and to support the peaceful use of outer space.

In this regard, we note again that a senior Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs official provided assurances last year to the United States that China will not conduct future ASAT tests in space. This commitment by China is an important step forward, and the international community expects China to live up to its pledge to act responsibly in outer space.

Looking to the broader questions of space security, the United States believes that bilateral transparency and confidence-building measures with Russia and with China could form the foundation for establishing a set of multilateral voluntary TCBMs. As a result, the United States will continue to play a leading role in advancing TCBMs for national security and related space activities.

Pragmatic multilateral TCBMs can help increase transparency regarding governmental space policies, strategies, and potentially hazardous activities. TCBMs can also help to reduce uncertainty over intentions and decrease the risk of misinterpretation or miscalculation.

Over the past two years, the United States has had fruitful and forthright exchanges with European experts regarding the European Union’s proposal for a “Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities.” Looking ahead, the United States will continue to work with the European Union and other like-minded nations in efforts to advance a set of voluntary TCBMs that is acceptable to the greatest number of countries.

Mr. Chairman, as representatives of France have noted in past presentations to this Committee, the development of pragmatic, voluntary TCBMs can be enhanced by discussions at COPUOS that address general questions of spaceflight safety, including measures to prevent satellite collisions. In this regard, the United States looks forward to playing an active role in the multi-year study of “long-term sustainability of outer space activities” within the Scientific and Technical Committee of the COPUOS. This effort will examine the feasibility of voluntary “best practices guidelines” to help reduce operational risks to all space systems. This study will serve as a valuable opportunity for cooperation with established and emerging members of the spacefaring community to enhance spaceflight safety and preserve the space environment for future generations.
In consultation with allies, the Obama Administration is currently in the process of assessing U.S. space policy, programs, and options for international cooperation in space as a part of a comprehensive review of space policy. This review of space cooperation options includes a “blank slate” analysis of the feasibility and desirability of options for effectively verifiable arms control measures that enhance the national security interests of the United States and its allies. The United States looks forward to discussing insights gained from this Presidential review next year at the Conference on Disarmament during substantive discussions on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space agenda item as a part of a consensus program of work.

Mr. Chairman, although it is premature to predict the specific decisions on arms control that will result from this U.S. policy review, this Committee can rest assured that the United States will continue to uphold the principles of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which provides the fundamental guidelines required for the free access to, and use of, outer space by all nations for peaceful purposes. The United States will continue to support the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense, as reflected in the UN Charter. The United States also will continue to:

- Reject any limitations on the fundamental right of the United States to operate in, and acquire data from, space.
- Conduct United States space activities in accordance with international law, including the Charter of the United Nations, in the interest of maintaining international peace and security and promoting international cooperation and understanding.
- Highlight the responsibility of states to avoid harmful interference to other nations’ peaceful exploration and use of outer space.
- Take a leadership role in international fora to promote policies and practices aimed at debris minimization and preservation of the space environment.

To further these goals, the United States will seek opportunities to work with other like-minded nations here in the United Nations and in other fora in the furtherance of international norms and standards that can help advance the common good and enhance stability and security in outer space. The United States stands ready to begin a new chapter of international cooperation in outer space that recognizes the rights and responsibilities of all nations. Together, we
can build the future in outer space which all people that on Earth do dwell so richly deserve.