NGO Statement to First Committee on outer space*

Mr. President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to address you today regarding the importance of outer space sustainability.

In our world today, outer space and space activities play a critical role in international, national, and human security. From communications to navigation; from scientific development to environmental monitoring; humanity has become increasingly reliant on outer space for social and economic development, as well as for security needs. However, as our activities in and our dependence on the space domain have grown, so has the risk that we are using it unsustainably.

As more and more States rightfully access and benefit from space, it has grown more congested, contested, and competitive. Large amounts of orbital debris pose an indiscriminate threat not only to critical and expensive space assets, but also to humans engaged in space exploration. The possibility of losing our ability to operate safely and reliably in space is further threatened by the development and potential deployment of anti-satellite weapons. Some NGOs believe that the ongoing development of missile defense systems may threaten the space domain, given their potential use as anti-satellite weapons. It is critical that the international community address these challenges and establish norms of responsible behavior for space activities so that humanity can continue to benefit from space in the long-term.

The principles established by the 1967 Outer Space Treaty constitute a propitious starting point. However, they are no longer sufficient for addressing current challenges to the space domain. The current nature of the space environment and the particular challenges I have mentioned already necessitate that the international community urgently take action to lay down norms that not only reflect current threats to space security, but also tackle the governance questions that will inevitably arise as space becomes even more congested. This task requires international attention and cooperative solutions.

Fortunately, this forum has never failed to appreciate the importance of safeguarding outer space for the peaceful uses of all humankind in the long-term. For years now, the UN General Assembly has passed resolutions with an overwhelming majority calling on the Conference on Disarmament to address the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space. The People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation tabled a draft treaty on this subject in 2008 in the CD.

Further dialogue, deliberation, and negotiation will be required to identify what entails responsible behavior for all space actors and how best to achieve it, whether it is through a legally-binding, comprehensive international treaty or through other normative mechanisms. Unfortunately, the Conference on Disarmament has been deadlocked for 15 years, primarily because a few States do not want to negotiate specific issues on the Conference’s agenda.

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In a welcome development, the General Assembly has taken action to push the issue of space sustainability forward. Last year, it passed a resolution requesting that the Secretary-General establish a Group of Governmental Experts to examine transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities. Such measures can be a positive and considerable step forward in establishing norms of responsible behavior in space activities.

The value of comprehensive, legally-binding treaties should not be dismissed. Formal agreements such as these have been key tools for improving international security and stability. Even if a binding treaty is the ultimate goal, there is an urgent need in the short term for building common understanding and norms of responsible behavior in space. Steps toward stability, and potentially a more formal arrangement, can be achieved in the near term through the pursuit of transparency and confidence-building measures and other normative mechanisms. As such, the work of the GGE is foundational to any future developments in regulating and governing space.

This Group of Governmental Experts, or GGE, is set to convene for the first of its three meetings in July 2012 and represents a promising opportunity to enhance the long-term sustainable use of outer space. Instead of rehashing the same issues, the GGE should build upon work on TCBMs in space already carried out by a similar Group of Governmental Experts from 1991 to 1993. Further, it is our hope that next year’s GGE not only produces a report of strong and clear recommendations, but also lays down a foundation for putting some of those recommendations into action.

NGO and civil society actors can be a substantial resource for this process as well. We can provide sound research and analysis, differing perspectives, a link to public opinion and support, and valuable insights. It is our hope that the GGE is able to produce some real and tangible results that help safeguard the incredibly important space environment so that current and future generations can continue to benefit from this domain.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.