Statement by:
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Joint ad hoc meeting of the
70th UNGA First and Fourth Committees
to address possible challenges to space security and sustainability
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Fifty-two years ago, at the beginning of the Space Age, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the “Declaration of Legal Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Uses of Outer Space,” or Principles Declaration. This Declaration laid out the key principle that outer space is free for exploration and use by all States on the basis of equality and in accordance with international law. Just over three years later, these and other elements of the Principles Declaration formed the core for the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which remains the foundation of the international legal framework for space activities.

Today, we find more than 60 nations and numerous government consortia, scientists, and commercial firms accessing and operating satellites for countless economic, scientific, educational, and social purposes. This situation has elevated international space systems and activities to a global scale — that is, they are of benefit not only to their immediate users, owners, and operators, but also to the global economy and security environment.

In this dynamic environment, how do we address the challenges associated with orbital congestion, collision avoidance, and the continued development by some nations of destructive counterspace capabilities?

It is clear that no one nation can address these challenges alone. Therefore, international cooperation to address the challenges can, and must, occur through practical means. Under the capable chairmanship of Ambassador Victor Vasiliev of Russia, the July 2013 consensus report of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures (TCBMs) in Outer Space Activities recommended a range of measures to enhance stability in space in the form of national commitments as well as through bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation. That report offers a solid starting point for discussions on
addressing challenges to space security and sustainability, and also provides useful criteria for the consideration of new TCBM concepts and proposals.

The report endorsed efforts “to encourage responsible actions in, and the peaceful use of, outer space.” In this regard, the United States has, for example, pursued a range of bilateral space security exchanges and offers support to all spacefaring nations to reduce the chances of accidental satellite collisions. The report also recommended that States review and implement, on a voluntary basis, the specific TCBMs contained in the report. The United States is already implementing many of these measures, including information exchanges, risk reduction notifications, contacts and visits, international cooperation, outreach, and coordination.

The United States also supports efforts in multiple fora to translate GGE recommendations into results by encouraging responsible actions by all nations in their peaceful use of outer space. In particular, the United States was pleased to join Russia and China in co-sponsoring General Assembly Resolutions 68/50 and 69/38. We are also pleased to be co-sponsoring another TCBMs resolution this year in the First Committee. These resolutions encourage Member States to review and implement, to the greatest extent practicable, the proposed TCBMs contained in the GGE report, and to refer the report’s recommendations for consideration by the Conference on Disarmament, the UN Disarmament Commission, and the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS). Now the international community should focus on practical and pragmatic forms of international cooperation that advance the GGE report’s recommendations.

It is particularly noteworthy that, during its June 2015 session in Vienna, COPUOS considered the GGE report’s recommendations, including a review of submissions by its members. The U.S. submission highlighted its implementation of the TCBMs contained in the GGE report, in particular those with relevance to the work of the Committee’s working group on long-term sustainability of outer space activities.

The United States commends Peter Martinez for his dedicated efforts as working group chair and looks forward to the completion of a set of concrete consensus guidelines next year. Besides its obvious contributions to enhancing spaceflight safety and building capacity in newer space faring nations, it has become increasingly apparent that this working group could also contribute to the development of TCBMs that would enhance stability. COPUOS also remains the primary multilateral forum for the continued consideration of other forms of
international cooperation seeking to ensure the sustainable use of outer space in support of sustainable development here on Earth.

The United States also supports improved coordination on the implementation of space TCBMs across the United Nations system. These efforts should ensure that the Secretariat’s Office of Disarmament Affairs and the Office for Outer Space Affairs work closely with other UN agencies to ensure that existing resources are applied effectively to advance the goals of space security and sustainability.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me conclude by underlining the central assumption that guides U.S. efforts to promote cooperation in outer space – that is, that a secure and sustainable outer space environment is vital for every nation, for its security, foreign policy, and global economic interests and for enhancing the daily lives of its citizens.

Meeting the challenges of orbital congestion, collision avoidance, and responsible and peaceful behavior in space is the responsibility of all that are engaged in space activities. We must work together to do more to protect our long-term interests by safeguarding against risks that could harm the space environment and could disrupt space-derived services on which the international community depends.

Thank you for your kind attention.