Statement to the 74th Session of the General Assembly First Committee

Outer space security
Delivered by Cesar Jaramillo – October 2019

Chair,

Outer space now provides vast social, scientific and economic benefits to humanity, but the continued enjoyment of these benefits is anything but guaranteed. As the number of space users and applications has increased, so too have the threats to its long-term sustainability.

Critically, no clear norms are in place today to prevent an arms race in outer space. It is thus imperative that this Committee engage in policy discussions specifically related to space arms control, with a view to avoiding the weaponization of this critical domain.

Ground-based anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) continue to be tested; satellites are deliberately and routinely jammed; missile defense systems have been used as ASATs; and precursor technologies that would allow space-to-space offensive capabilities have been developed. Now major spacefaring nations are advancing worrying rhetoric about space as a warfighting domain, and even about military forces for outer space.

This year’s Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on further effective measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS) failed to reach consensus on recommendations. Earlier proposals for both legally-binding agreements—such as the Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, PPWT—and politically binding ones—such as the International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities—have faltered. And the Conference on Disarmament, which has the primary responsibility for negotiations related to PAROS, has been deadlocked and unable to conduct any substantive negotiations for more than twenty years.

The international community must work decisively to ensure that the right of all countries to access space and the obligation to ensure that space is used with due regard to the interests of others and for peaceful purposes are maintained. International space law, as well a unilateral, bilateral and multilateral transparency and confidence-building measures can make space more secure by regulating activities that may infringe upon the ability of actors to access and use space safely and sustainably, and by limiting space-based threats to national assets in space or on Earth.

The Outer Space Treaty was explicit that the use of space must be for “peaceful purposes” and “for the benefit and in the interests of all countries”. It is in this spirit that we urge states to:
1. Pledge not to use any space- or ground-based capabilities to deliberately damage or destroy space assets; and,

2. Indicate support for the negotiation of a treaty preventing an arms race in outer space, and for interim transparency and confidence-building measures towards that end.

Beyond these commitments, there is a clear need to formulate national and international security policies that do not rely on, or give a veil of legitimacy to, the weaponization of outer space as a means of advancing political and strategic objectives.

Multilateral arms control efforts have typically occurred only after certain categories of weapons have already been used in conflict. With PAROS, the international community now has the unique possibility to act proactively before outer space becomes weaponized—and before the social and economic benefits derived from this domain are put in jeopardy.

Let us seize this opportunity and act decisively to prevent an arms race in outer space.

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