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Thematic Discussion on Outer Space  

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Mr. Chairman,  

Today, the world is increasingly reliant on space assets for prosperity and security which brings tremendous benefits to all nations. The United States believes that there is a common interest in maintaining peace and security in outer space for the benefit of all. As such, we support existing international law in this area, in particular the Outer Space Treaty and the UN Charter, which continue to serve as an essential framework of principles, ensuring that all nations benefit from outer space.  

At the same time, we take note of the desire of all countries to reduce the risk to space system operations. In order to effectively address these risks, we need to move beyond a singular focus on the placement of weapons in space, towards practical methods of mitigating the risks of misperception and miscalculation.  

These efforts are essential in the face of efforts by some countries to develop, stockpile, and use weapon systems that threaten to deny other State’s use of space.  

For example, Russia announced the deployment of a ground-based laser weapon designed to “fight satellites.” Moreover, the United States has significant questions about a Russian satellite whose behavior was inconsistent with anything seen before and appears to directly contradict Russia’s proposed No First Placement resolution. Here we have the main proponents of the No First Placement resolution actively proclaiming their capability to attack satellites, with no explanation of how this system is consistent with its push for space arms control.  

Then there is China, which in 2007 launched a ground-based missile that intentionally created 3,000 pieces of debris when it destroyed a Chinese satellite.  

This system is operational in China today. So, what can we do to reduce these risks? The United States believes we can reduce them through cooperating in the development of non-legally binding
measures that avoid risking the stability and security of the outer space environment, including through effective communications, which can enhance international confidence in outer space operations.

That is why we seek to advance multilateral transparency and confidence building measures that build upon the 2013 Group of Governmental Experts Report in order to reduce the risk to spacecraft and that are complementary to the existing legal regime. To this end, we were hoping to have a single, consensus resolution for the committee to consider this year on Transparency and Confidence Building Measures. But unfortunately, we have not been able to engage in meaningful discussions with Russian and Chinese colleagues.

Therefore, we have submitted a separate resolution. Our resolution on advancing transparency and confidence-building measures provides more meaningful and practical methods of mitigating the risks of misperception and miscalculation and was developed to advance progress on this issue in the United Nations. It is a step toward advancing and developing standards of responsible behavior in outer space and best practices for space operations.

We also want to note the adoption of a preamble and 21 guidelines for Long-Term Sustainability in Space by the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, which provides guidelines for safe and sustainable space activities.

We believe that efforts such as developing best practices in accordance with the 2013 TCBM GGE’s criteria could form the foundation for habits of trust and cooperation between State actors in the space environment, reduce the risks of operating in space, and ultimately reduce the risk of conflict extending into outer space. We look forward to working cooperatively to create those principles over the coming years.