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Delegation of the United States of America

70th UNGA First Committee  
Thematic Discussion on Outer Space (Disarmament Aspects)  
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to have this opportunity to address the First Committee’s Thematic Discussion on Outer Space today. The United States has often expressed its commitment to ensuring the long-term sustainability, stability, safety, and security of the space environment. Addressing the issues associated with orbital congestion, collision avoidance, and responsible and peaceful behavior in space are the responsibilities of all that are engaged in space activities. How we address these pressing challenges facing the international community today is an important question that has arisen in discussions within the UN General Assembly’s First Committee as well as the Conference on Disarmament (CD) and elsewhere.

In considering options for international cooperation to ensure space security and sustainability, some nations would prefer to pursue a new legally binding arms control agreement, such as the June 2014 draft “Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects,” or PPWT, offered by Russia and China at the CD. The United States continues to believe that the PPWT is a fundamentally flawed document and cannot form the basis for negotiations in Geneva. We have provided our views on the draft PPWT many times and so will not repeat them here.

Mr. Chairman, the United States continues to be particularly concerned about the continued development and testing of destructive anti-satellite (ASAT) systems. Contrary to the advocacy by some States for arms control measures to prevent the use of force against space objects, the development of ASAT capabilities by some of these same States could trigger dangerous misinterpretations and miscalculations and could be escalatory in a crisis or conflict. The United States believes that testing debris-generating ASAT systems threatens international security and economic well-being along with threatening the legitimate civil and scientific space endeavors of all nations.

In contrast to the approach advocated by some States to pursue protracted negotiations to conclude a legally binding instrument, the United States is convinced that many outer space challenges confronting us could be addressed
through practical, near-term initiatives, such as non-legally binding TCBMs. Such pragmatic measures are either already being implemented unilaterally, bilaterally, or multilaterally, or could be developed and implemented in the future by nations.

As discussed in this forum and in yesterday’s joint ad hoc meeting of the First and Fourth Committees, the 2013 consensus report of the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) study of outer space TCBMs endorsed voluntary, non-legally binding TCBMs to strengthen stability in space and to encourage responsible actions in, and the peaceful use of, space. The report’s recommendations were endorsed by the full General Assembly in Resolutions 68/50 and 69/38, both of which the United States co-sponsored with Russia and China, as well as a resolution that will be considered this year in the First Committee.

The GGE report also established criteria for the development of outer space TCBMs. In applying these criteria, U.S. experts, along with a number of GGE experts from other countries, have noted that some TCBM proposals, such as Russia’s initiative for States to make declarations of “No First Placement,” or NFP, of weapons in outer space, fails to satisfy the GGE criteria. The United States assesses that this proposal does not adequately define what constitutes a “weapon in outer space;” would not enable effective confirmation by other States of a State’s political commitment “not to be the first to place weapons in outer space;” and focuses exclusively on space-based weapons and overlooks the most pressing threat to outer space systems: terrestrially based anti-satellite weapons.

To date, the NFP initiative’s proponents have not explained how the NFP initiative would be consistent with the GGE’s TCBM criteria, or how such an initiative would enhance stability in space when it is silent with regard to terrestrially based ASAT weapons. In contrast, other TCBMs do meet the GGE’s criteria, such as: developing guidelines for spaceflight safety and debris mitigation; providing collision avoidance notifications; being transparent about national space policies, and national security space strategies. Such notifications, coordination, and exchanges not only improve awareness, but also increase transparency by mitigating the risk of mishaps, misperceptions, and mistrust. The United States is already implementing such TCBMs and encourages other nations to do the same.

Mr. Chairman, let me conclude by saying that, if we are serious about sustaining the outer space environment for future generations, then we must address the challenges facing us today, by working together to develop and implement pragmatic measures rather than pursuing approaches that are unlikely to be timely, equitable, or effective.