

Conference on Disarmament

Plenary meeting on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space

Statement by Ambassador John Freeman

Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom

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Mr President, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the subject of the prevention of an arms race in outer space.

Since the launch of the first man-made satellite, Sputnik, into outer space in 1957, mankind has achieved major advances in space exploration and use. Atmospheric observation, lunar and interplanetary exploration have become the basis for environmental sciences. There have also been significant advances in communications, navigation, meteorology and sensing. All states have the right to explore outer space and make the most of opportunities for scientific, economic, environmental and communications advances.

As well as these civil and scientific uses, the scope of national security activities in outer space has also grown. Although the focus of our governments' policies on space is on civil and scientific uses, the security benefits we derive from its use are important: satellite communications, surveillance, reconnaissance, mapping, early warning, navigation and sensing are all integral to our national security responsibilities.

But as more and more countries become involved in space activities, it is essential that we avoid misperceptions and mistrust by promoting clarity and co-operation. This is particularly important given the unique characteristics of the space environment and space technology. Although space is relatively difficult to access, it lies not far above every nation. Operating equipment in space can be hazardous: risks are posed by radiation, by natural meteoroids and debris from human space activities. And yet once in orbit, a satellite can move at more than 25,000 kilometres each hour, circling the globe up to 16 times a day and providing a unique vehicle for observations of earth.

The right of all states to explore and use this unique shared environment for the benefit and in the interest of all humankind is a universally accepted legal principle. It is the concern and responsibility of all states to ensure that these rights are realised in the interest of maintaining international peace and security. The cornerstone of international space law is the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, to which the United Kingdom is a Depository. This treaty places important constraints on military activity in space: it bans the deployment of WMD in space and military activity on the moon and other celestial

bodies. The United Kingdom continues to be a firm supporter. Our commitment to efforts to prevent an arms race in outer space was also demonstrated through our support for the First Committee resolution on this subject last October.

But as national security activities in space have grown, so have concerns by some states about the risk of an arms race in outer space. Some states would wish to see additional and more extensive arms control measures. We acknowledge colleagues' concerns, but there is no international consensus on the need for further treaties and further legal codification of the use of space would be difficult both to agree and verify. But, that said, we recognise that many states and CD partners, would wish to discuss this subject as part of what they would regard as a balanced programme of work in this forum.

However, even agreeing the terms of such a discussion would not be easy and would require debate in itself. The Chinese and Russian delegations have set out some interesting thoughts on definitions in a non-paper issued earlier this month. It is not a simple task to find a widely acceptable definition of what constitutes either "militarisation" or "weaponisation" of space. Views also differ on whether weapons used for the defensive or peaceful use of space would be classified in the same way as offensive space or anti-space capabilities. It would seem sensible to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapon capabilities, but again this is not an issue on which all nations agree. Without agreeing the terms of the debate, it is difficult to discuss these important issues.

Also space presents both challenges and opportunities for verification of any arms control agreements. The vast distances of space, the sophisticated technologies of space systems and the difficulty of differentiating between systems used for both civilian and military purposes can make verification complex. At the same time, space is the most transparent of environments, open in all directions.

Given the difficulty of verifying or agreeing further legal treaties, we suggested last year in an informal setting, that it might be a useful idea to think about adopting "rules of the road" in space, similar to those that already exist at sea. These would not be easy to reach agreement upon, but they might have immediate benefits such as reducing the risk of accidental collisions, preventing incidents, and promoting 'safe passage' for satellites. We would welcome CD partners' views on this informal suggestion.

In any event, Mr President, we welcome the chance to discuss these important issues and by so doing to respond to the interest expressed in this subject by many CD partners.

Thank you Mr President.