



UK Mission
Geneva

CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

AGENDA ITEM 3: PREVENTION OF AN ARMS RACE IN OUTER SPACE

STATEMENT BY THE UNITED KINGDOM

H.E. Mr Aidan Liddle, Permanent Representative
Geneva, 1 June 2021

Mr President,

Thank you for organising today's thematic discussion on agenda item 3, 'prevention of an arms race in outer space' – a topic to which the UK attaches great importance. My thanks also for the four excellent presentations we heard this morning. Let me also join you in welcoming our new colleague from Sweden, Ambassador Jardfelt.

As Ms Zarkan reminded us this morning, the question of the prevention of an arms race in outer space has been on the agenda of this Conference for three decades now. Despite strenuous efforts over that time, whether here, in the UN Disarmament Commission or in the UN General Assembly, it is fair to say that progress has been slow, and the very real difficulties presented by the nature of the space domain, which my colleague the Ambassador of France just recalled, have not been overcome. At the same time, the complexity, range of applications, and number of space systems has grown at an extraordinary rate, as has all States' dependence on those systems for their prosperity and security.

In December last year, 164 UN Member States voted in favour of General Assembly Resolution 75/36, entitled 'Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours'. The broad support for this resolution demonstrates that there is the will to try a new approach to the prevention of an arms race in outer space – complementing, not competing with, others. We believe that there is a growing recognition both of the strategic importance of space systems to all countries, and of the need for a new, inclusive, holistic approach to the long-standing problem of the prevention of an arms race in outer space. The UK initiated this new process because we believe that coming to a common understanding of responsible behaviours can help to avoid miscalculation and escalation that could lead to conflict – which could have a catastrophic impact – and to address the factors that could drive an arms race in outer space.

The resolution asked States to study the threats to space systems and share their ideas on the further development and implementation of norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours, and on the reduction of the risks of misunderstanding and miscalculation with respect to outer space. We were pleased with the response to the call for contributions to the Secretary-General's report, from States and civil society, and I would like to thank everyone who responded to that call.

In our own submission, we set out how space operators must deal with a number of challenges to operating in space. Those challenges include what we refer to as "hazards" that could harm a space system – these are generally naturally occurring in the space environment, or are the result of space activity (for example, debris). Much progress has been made on addressing these challenges in other fora, as we heard from Ms Archinard.

We refer to the second category of challenges as "threats", meaning actions or activities using capabilities that threaten the space systems of another State. A number of States already have the ability to threaten the space systems of other countries, through capabilities such as Direct Ascent weapons; Coorbital weapons; Directed Energy weapons; Electronic weapons; and cyber capabilities. This is not theoretical: these technologies already exist, and have been deployed. This being the case, the call not to place weapons in space looks outdated, and ignores the wide variety of capabilities that threaten space systems today.

Our submission suggests that seven types of activity would benefit from further, expert-level discussion: (i) destruction of, or threat to destroy, a satellite; (ii) use of direct ascent Anti-Satellite missiles; (iii) non-kinetic threats, such as lasers; (iv) threats aimed at creating loss of imagery/sight of space assets; (v) interference with Position, Navigation and Timing signals from satellites; (vi) reducing the ability of a ground operator to control a satellite; and (vii) Rendezvous Operations and Proximity Operations.

The UK does not wish to be prescriptive in setting out how we might address these types of activity. Nevertheless, our submission does include, as a means of beginning a discussion, some examples of how responsible behaviours might reduce risks related to these areas. In the interests of time I will go into the details here, but they are of course available on the UNODA website.

The UK looks forward to the Secretary-General's report and to the discussions with the UN membership that will follow.

Mr President,

Resolution 75/36 also invited States to inform this Conference of “their national space security policies, strategies or doctrines, on a voluntary basis, in accordance with and in support of the mandates of those bodies”.

This year the UK will make a number of announcements on its space policy, building on the commitment in the recently published Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy to make the UK “a meaningful actor in space, with an integrated space strategy, which brings together military and civil space policy for the first time.” The Integrated Review notes that space will be a domain of increasing opportunity, as the application of new technologies in space enables new possibilities – from commercial opportunities to international development and climate action. But it also recognises that increasing commercial and military use of space will make it an important sphere of competition; there will be considerable risks to strategic stability if this is not managed and regulated effectively. As such, the Integrated Review set out the UK’s strategy both to support the growth of the UK commercial space sector, including the ability to launch satellites from the UK by 2022, and to protect our interests in a more congested and contested space domain.

The UK’s new National Space Council, with the status of a Cabinet Committee, is developing the UK’s first National Space Strategy. We hope to be able to present this strategy later in this year’s CD session. Following the National Space Strategy, we also intend to publish a Defence Space Strategy. We will be fully transparent about these strategies and will share them when they are finalised.

One element that has already been established, since 1 April this year, is the UK Space Command for Defence. It is a Joint Command staffed from the Royal Navy, British Army, Royal Air Force and the Civil Service. When fully operationally capable, UK Space Command will provide command and control of all of Defence’s space capabilities. These include the UK Space Operations Centre, whose mission is to understand and monitor the space domain in order to protect, defend and assure access to the UK’s on-orbit assets or dependencies; the SKYNET Satellite Communications system; the space monitoring and ballistic missile early warning station at RAF Fylingdales; and other enabling capabilities.

Mr President,

The UK’s continued engagement in international efforts to develop norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours in space, to reduce the risk of conflict, and manage threats in or arising from space, is an integral part of this strategy. We look forward to the UN Secretary-General’s report pursuant to resolution 75/36 later in the summer. In the meantime, we also must turn our minds to the question of what form the ‘further discussion’ provided for in resolution 75/36 will take.

We have always said that as well as being inclusive, this process needs to be organic. We know there will be different views on how to approach these challenges, and we need to reconcile them if we are to make progress. The process will therefore need to evolve as it goes along, without prejudice to the form our solutions will take.

We note that many of the national submissions call for a further phase of collective work to reach a shared understanding of what constitutes responsible, irresponsible and threatening behaviour for space systems; what norms, rules and principles already exist; and what we need to do to develop that framework further. We will consult Member States intensively over the summer as we prepare the draft resolution for the next session of the First Committee in October.

Finally, Mr President, let me once again express my gratitude to everyone who has shared their perspectives on these issues. We look forward to working with you all in the coming months and years to develop an approach to outer space security that works for everyone.

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