

First Committee Exchange with Civil Society: Joint Statement on Outer Space 2021

Delivered by Dr. Jessica West, Project Ploughshares

Thank-you Chair,

Outer space is featured in the UN Secretary-General's report on [Our Common Agenda](#) aimed at addressing our interconnected challenges and improving humanity's welfare. Framed by the twin concepts of the global commons and global public goods, the report asserts that the peaceful, secure, and sustainable use of outer space is threatened by increasing congestion and competition. It thus proposes a new agenda for peace that includes multi-stakeholder dialogues on outer space as part of a Summit of the Future.

This is an agenda of action. And here at First Committee we too must commit to action.

While the international community has endeavoured to preserve outer space as a peaceful domain free of weapons, an arms race has been bubbling beneath the surface.

We know that interference with satellites— including the jamming of satellite communications and dazzling of their sensors – is rampant.

We have witnessed states demonstrate a hit-to-kill anti-satellite capability using ground-based weapons systems. We have also witnessed some of these states chastise others for engaging in the same behaviour.

There is evidence that the development of other anti-satellite capabilities such as directed energy weapons is accelerating.

And anti-satellite capabilities based in space are a real possibility.

These actions threaten war. No one wants it, yet multiple states are actively preparing for it. The risk of unintentional conflict through mishaps, misinterpretations, and miscommunications is great, and the potential consequences even greater. And let us be clear: there is no such thing as war in space detached from reality on Earth. War in space is war among states.

At this Committee, support for the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space remains near unanimous. But the divides over how to implement this objective – whether through legal restrictions, political commitments, or normative understandings of responsible behaviour – impede progress. These are not mutually exclusive options. None can progress without efforts to enhance trust and transparency.

This year there is reason for cautious optimism. As part of last year's initiative by the United Kingdom to start a new dialogue on norms of behaviour in space, 30 states plus the European Union and 9 NGOs and international organizations submitted views on the kind of behaviours or activities that seem threatening, those that are reassuring, and opportunities to find common ground in an effort to avoid slipping into unwanted confrontations. This year the dialogue is set to continue through a proposed Open Ended Working Group. We urge states to support this initiative, with the understanding that success will depend on good-faith participation and engagement.

In the spirit of building a common agenda, we also urge states:

1. Not to deliberately damage or destroy any space asset.

2. To support concrete, complementary efforts to prevent an arms race in outer space, and for necessary transparency and confidence-building measures towards that end, through statements, voting, and active engagement with existing processes.

3. To consider the merits of a kinetic anti-satellite test ban treaty such as that detailed in the [Open International Letter on Kinetic ASAT testing](#) by the Outer Space Institute.

Beyond these commitments, states should lead through example and refrain from testing weapons targeting space; offer greater transparency about their military space activities; demonstrate behaviours that contribute to stability and peaceful uses; and call out behaviour that violates these principles.

War in space would threaten the thousands of satellites that provide social and economic benefits to billions of people all around the world. It risks mass contamination of an already-fragile environment. And it has the potential to spill over into war here on Earth, including possible nuclear escalation. We cannot wait for a crisis to act.

Thank-you.

Organizational Signatories:

Project Ploughshares

Canadian Pugwash Group

Rideau Institute

Observer Research Foundation

PAX

Women's League for International Peace and Freedom

Individual Signatories:

Dr. Aaron Boley, Canada Research Chair in Planetary Astronomy, University of British Columbia; Co-Director, Outer Space Institute

Dr. Michael Byers, Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law, University of British Columbia; Co-Director, Outer Space Institute

Andrew Falle, Research Coordinator and Junior Fellow, Outer Space Institute

Dr. Laura Grego, Research Fellow, Department of Nuclear Science and Engineering, MIT

Dr. Ram Jakhu, McGill Institute of Air and Space Law

Dr. David Kendall, Fellow, Outer Space Institute

Amb. (ret'd) Paul Meyer, Fellow, Outer Space Institute

Dr. Cassandra Steer, Senior Lecturer, ANU College of Law & Mission Specialist, ANU Institute for Space (InSpace)

Dr. Lucy Stojak, Executive Director, Mosaic HEC Montréal