



Open-ended working group on reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviors

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General Exchange of Views

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Thank you, Mr Chair. As this is the first time that Secure World Foundation takes the floor, let me congratulate you on your appointment. We wish you all success in leading this body and put ourselves at your disposal for support in any way we can. We also wish to thank Member States for the opportunity to provide our perspective and insight.

Secure World Foundation is a private operating foundation dedicated to the secure and sustainable use of outer space for the benefit of all peoples of the Earth. We work with governments, intergovernmental organizations, industry, academia, and civil society to develop and promote international cooperation to achieve the secure, sustainable, and peaceful uses of outer space.. As such, we welcome this Open-Ended Working Group and its mandate “to make recommendations on possible norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours relating to threats by States to space systems.” The work before this body is considerable, but that is the nature of all achievements in this realm.

As we will hear throughout the course of this week, space systems are of critical importance to modern society, and their loss would have devastating consequences both for the global economy and global security. For this reason, we are concerned that States are actively pursuing the means to disrupt, damage or even destroy objects in space. Indeed, as we have seen recently, testing destructive anti-satellite capabilities on orbit can create dangerous long-lived debris, which poses a grave risk to satellites and humans in space. The intentional creation of debris creates uncertainty and risk in an environment that is already full of hazards, creating additional challenges to operating in outer space for all stakeholders. It is our position that there is no such thing as a “responsible” ASAT test that destroys a space object.

Mr Chair, Secure World Foundation welcomes the recent announcement by the United States to commit not to conduct direct-ascent ASAT missile tests. We see this as a significant positive step in a dialogue that has seen little progress in decades. Moreover, this pledge is a highly sensible one. The testing of destructive ASAT weapons creates debris that threatens all actors, including the testing party; furthermore, it is easily verified. We call on other countries, particularly those who have also tested destructive ASAT weapons, to make similar commitments. And we encourage the OEWG to consider, as part of its discussions, developing a verifiable ASAT test moratorium or even a ban. Given enough international support for such a norm of behavior, this could lay the foundation for what could eventually evolve into a legally binding instrument.

The international community must also lay the foundations to be able to verify future agreements. Space situational awareness (SSA) has been a top priority for many countries for more than a decade now and includes monitoring and characterizing activities in space. These SSA capabilities could form the foundation of a verification regime for an ASAT test ban or other agreements on irresponsible behaviors in space. The key is matching SSA capabilities with the stipulations of an agreement and ensuring that all parties can feel confident in their own verification abilities, whether that is through their indigenous SSA capabilities or reliable access to dependable commercial SSA data and services. Such a regime would also be enhanced by making at least some of the data publicly accessible.

There should be discussions on agreements to provide clarity on certain types of interactions between military satellites that could increase tensions or trigger conflict. There is a strong case for developing a multilateral space version of the Incidents at Sea Agreement between the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Such an agreement could clarify accepted behavior for non-cooperative rendezvous and proximity operations and, where possible, provide notifications of upcoming activities to help reduce the chances of misperceptions or risks to spaceflight safety. As part of these discussions, space actors should share their perspectives on how the existing laws of armed conflict apply to military space activities.

Additionally, we believe part of the work of this group is to identify what the global community identifies to be responsible behavior writ large. Encouraging responsible behavior in space starts with developing a shared understanding among the international community of what constitutes responsible behavior and what constitutes irresponsible or threatening behavior on orbit. Making this distinction will enable the international community to recognize and condemn bad behavior when it happens, or at least to identify when behavior is threatening, whether it is being done with malfeasance or not.

Mr Chair, Secure World Foundation wishes you and each Member State all the luck in your discussions. We reiterate that we are at the disposal of this body to help in any way we can.