

## SPECIAL COMMENT

We have not yet reached a consensus on where outer space begins and where it ends. But, it is clear that there is no end to how important it is to our everyday lives. Since 1957, almost 7,000 satellites have been launched. Today, some 900 space satellites are in orbit, operated by more than 40 countries.

The preservation of the peaceful use of space is in the interest of all countries—whether they are space-capable or spacefaring, or not. Space exploration generates technological innovation that is essential in accelerating development. Satellite communications provide access in remote and isolated communities to bridge the so-called digital divide. Space technologies enable monitoring of the pace and extent of global warming, which is critical in informing and directing our mitigation efforts. Telecommunications, television, navigation, enhanced warning systems for natural disasters, support for recovery activities, weather forecasting, agricultural planning and natural resource protection make a considerable contribution to the world economy—and they all increasingly depend on the use of outer space.

We may not have our heads in the clouds, but our collective terrestrial well-being is certainly closely linked with our celestial progress. Any interruption of the use of outer space would disrupt our daily lives. With benefits comes responsibility, and with dependence comes vulnerability. It is the combination of these four factors that makes the need to take action for greater space security so urgent.

Many space systems and their applications are of dual use. As technology advances in space, the likelihood of space becoming a conflict arena increases. Preventing a weaponization of outer space is fundamental to our collective security and to ensuring strategic stability.

The International Space Station is a compelling example of the benefits of a collaborative approach to space research. As one of the most complex scientific endeavours ever undertaken, it involves support from five space agencies, representing 16 nations. Even if space may be the final frontier, there should not be any borders in our cooperation there.

For its part, the United Nations has played a leading role in establishing principles to ensure that outer space and space activities continue to enhance the well-being of humankind. This Organization has brokered international treaties stipulating that outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies, is not subject to national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means. Moreover, treaties provide for freedom of exploration, liability for damage caused by space objects, space safety and rescue, notification and registration of space activities, dispute settlement and the scientific investigation and exploitation of natural resources in outer space.

The 1967 Outer Space Treaty has so far provided the basic framework of international space law. The 1963 Treaty banning Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Atmosphere, the 1972 Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects and the 1975 Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space are milestones. Likewise, the 1979 Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies and the 1976 Convention on the Prohibition of Military or any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques represent considerable achievements in the ongoing efforts to reserve the use of outer space for peaceful and scientific purposes.

All of these legal instruments were agreed and adopted during the Cold War. The record of implementation, coupled with technological developments and capabilities, have demonstrated that they do not offer a comprehensive solution to current and future challenges to space security. There is a clear need to update the legal regime.

I firmly believe that all areas of disarmament are connected and that progress in one area will have a positive impact on developments in other fields. We need to build on the current trend toward better relations among states to advance all areas of disarmament and arms control, including in outer space. Legally binding instruments, transparency and confidence-building measures must be combined to achieve security in outer space.

Initiatives such as the Chinese–Russian draft treaty on the “Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects (PPWT)”, the European Union draft Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities and a Canadian proposal all help to facilitate the process toward greater global security.

As the United Nations General Assembly has reiterated, the Conference on Disarmament has the primary role in the negotiation of a multilateral agreement, or agreements, on the prevention of an arms race in outer space in all its aspects. The adoption of a Programme of Work in the Conference in May 2009 opened new perspectives in these discussions and could pave the way for practical steps to strengthen the norms, institutions and legal regimes concerning space security.

A shared sense of urgency and political will are indispensable if we are to capitalize on the renewed momentum. This can best be nurtured and carried forward through partnerships among governments, international organizations, academia, industry and civil society. When we pool our resolve and our resourcefulness we can formulate strong solutions to the challenges before—and above—us.

As the human family, it is our obligation to preserve the benign nature of outer space and to put in place mechanisms to realize this goal. The longer we wait, the more difficult it will be to elaborate effective arms control measures. This is true for all fields of disarmament, but even more so for outer space where technology advances so quickly. And if we cannot make progress on outer space security, I doubt that we will be able to do so significantly in other areas. At the same time, success in the preservation of outer space for peaceful purposes could have a positive effect on other fields.

Space is our common heritage. And it is not a foregone conclusion that it will stay that way.

### **Sergei A. Ordzhonikidze**

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament and

Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the Conference