Joint panel discussion of the First and Fourth Committees on possible challenges to space security and sustainability

Introductory Remarks by Mr. Thomas Markram
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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome this opportunity to participate in this third joint meeting of the First and Fourth Committees. As with the previous iterations, I wish to thank the Office for Outer Space Affairs for their close cooperation in organizing this panel as well as for their continuing partnership.

This joint panel is taking place amidst a backdrop of accelerating challenges to the security and long-term sustainability of outer space. This includes the development of counter-space capabilities designed to inflict harm and damage across a full spectrum of violence, from cyber and electronic means of interference to the application of kinetic force. It also includes the development of dual-use capabilities which, if operated without adequate transparency, can erode trust, lead to unintended consequences and prompt other space actors to seek countermeasures, citing the right of self-defense.

In the absence of agreed norms, the expanding role and significance of the military use of outer space, including the growing number of actors recognizing outer space as a warfighting domain, may encourage more countries to seek counterspace capabilities to protect their own assets.

As is often the case with efforts to address the implications of emerging technologies, there is a risk that the pace of work within the United Nations will be insufficient. However, even taking into account some of the setbacks we have seen this year, there are reasons to remain hopeful.

It was regrettable that the Group of Governmental Experts on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space was unable to take the last step of agreeing to a substantive final report. However, through the iterative process of considering multiple drafts, it made important progress in clarifying central concepts, narrowing differences and identifying future areas of work.

Despite the inability of Disarmament Commission to convene its substantive session, informal consultations held in April resulted in useful exchanges and the discussion of new ideas, in the context of formulating recommendations on the implementation of transparency and confidence-building measures with the goal of preventing an arms race in outer space.
The Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space adopted the preamble and 21 guidelines on the long-term sustainability of outer space. Significantly, it also reestablished the working group with a mandate, inter alia, to consider possible new guidelines, which can include those with direct relevance to transparency and confidence-building measures.

Finally, delegations have already made use of this session of the General Assembly to raise possible new areas that could be pursued in future deliberations. To name some, these include measures to address the development and testing of anti-satellite weapons, guidelines on rendezvous and proximity operations, and norms of responsible behavior that address all possible threats to space activities, whether they originate from the earth or from space.

There is no reason why we should have to confront a choice of approach. Each of these measures can be pursued through multiple pathways. As the 2013 report of the group of governmental experts recognized, legally binding approaches and transparency and confidence-building measures are not mutually exclusive.

Upon request, there is also more that UN entities – ODA, OOSA, UNIDIR and others – can do together to facilitate the implementation of agreed measures. Some examples include the creation of a platform for exchanging information and dialogue on military space policies, doctrines and programmes as well as promoting the implementation of agreed norms within the private sector.

Joint meetings like these play an important role in bringing all relevant parts of the space policy community together to share their respective experiences and to ensure the coordination of efforts. It also serves as means for facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue and engaging with the private and non-governmental sectors.

In that spirit, I look forward to the presentations by the panelists and I hope that the following interactive dialogue among Member States will translate into concrete proposals to take forward all aspects of these issues in a way that makes use of the full potential of all available forums and the unique expertise in Vienna, Geneva and New York.

Thank you.