Topic A: Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space

"There is perhaps no better a demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world."

Introduction:

The militarization of space has been a concern for the United Nations for a long time. Indeed, this has occurred since the earliest communications satellites with militaries relying on satellites for command and control, communication, monitoring, early warning and navigation with GPS. Therefore, 'peaceful uses of Outer Space include military uses, even those that are not at all peaceful - such as using satellites to direct bombing raids or to orchestrate a 'prompt global strike' capacity, which is the control of any situation or defeat any adversary across the range of military operations'.

On the other hand, the weaponisation of outer space is the placement in orbit of space-based devices that have a destructive capacity. Some experts argue that ground based systems that are designed or used to attack space based assets, such as satellites constitute as space weapons, however these cannot count as part of the weaponisation of space since they aren't placed in orbit. Indeed, with the frequency at which satellites are used, it is no wonder that their use is vital on a military level. Some argue that many elements of the US ballistic 'missile defense' system which is being developed could constitute as space weapons as they could destroy space assets as well as missiles.

The reason this issue is so important to the international community is that the 'weaponisation of space would destroy the strategic balance and stability, undermine international and national security and disrupt existing arms control instruments, in particular those related to nuclear weapons and missiles'. There are currently no known weapons deployed in space, however the both the US and China have demonstrated antisatellite missile threats. While missile defence is presented as a mechanism for defence, in reality they can be easily converted for other uses.

This issue was first introduced to the United Nations in 1967 with the Outer Space Treaty. It was subsequently reaffirmed by the General Assembly in the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) resolution. This resolution also enabled the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in order to review and draft PAROS annually.

History of the topic:

The exploration of space in the mid-20th century had, in part, a military motivation. The United States and USSR used this as an opportunity to demonstrate ballistic missile technology and other technologies which could have potential military applications. As early as 1927, the Spaceflight Society in Germany had started experimenting with liquid fueled rockets. This occurred as a result of the Treaty of Versailles forbidding solid rocket fuel research in Germany.

By 1932, significant advancements had occurred in this field, especially in Germany where Wernher von Braun's, designs had caught the eye of the Reich Defence (Reichswehr). As a result, this led to the development of the V-1 and V-2 Flying bomb rockets which were used to bomb various cities during the Second World War. They had a range of over 150 miles and by the end of the war; the Germans launched thousands of these missiles against targets in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians.

During the Cold War, the United States and USSR spent vast amounts of money developing military technologies. Indeed, this drive eventually led to the space race with both countries regularly deploying satellites in order to take accurate pictures of their rival's military installations. With the importance of satellites growing over the years, both the United States and USSR began to develop anti-satellite weapons to blind and or destroy each other's satellites.

The superpowers eventually developed ballistic missiles which enabled them to use nuclear weaponry over great distances. These ballistic missiles could strike virtually any target on Earth in a matter of minutes rather than hours or days. Indeed, the main concern which these bring is that they are usually launched into sub-orbital spaceflight which allows them to intersect the atmosphere and travel vast distances in a very short period of time. With the end of the Cold War, the militarisation of space evolved into two different types of applications. The first is the continuing development of 'spy' satellites which are used for high resolution photography, communications eavesdropping and covert communications. They are also used by nuclear states to provide an early warning system in the case of a nuclear attack and locate nuclear detonations. At present is not known whether there are weapons in space due to high levels of state secrecy between the major powers which have space programs.

Previous UN Action:

With regard to the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space, the issue was first brought up by the Soviet Union, which sought to have the issue placed on the General Assembly's agenda. The Soviet Union also offered a draft treaty prohibiting the placement of weapons in outer space. This issue became a main concern to the United Nations, which noted in its UN Yearbook of 1981:

Concern was expressed during the General Assembly session that rapid advances in science and technology had made the extension of the arms race into outer space a real possibility, and that new kinds of weapons were still being developed despite the existence of international agreements such as [the Outer Space Treaty] which prohibited nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction from being placed in orbit or elsewhere is space.

Action was subsequently taken at that General Assembly session to request the CD's engagement on the matter. However, during this session, two resolutions were passed, each with different objectives for the CD to look upon. Paul Meyer notes that both resolutions agreed upon 'the need for the Conference on Disarmament to negotiate an international agreement on PAROS'. The first resolution (A/RES/36/97) was sponsored by Western Europe and other member states. It sought the CD to negotiate to prohibit anti-satellite systems. On the other hand, the second resolution (A/RES/36/99), which was sponsored by Eastern European and other states aimed for the CD to focus upon negotiating a treaty which prohibited the placement of weapons of any kind into outer space. In implementing the PAROS Treaty, the CD took a cautious approach in order to reflect both resolutions. In implementing the proposals, the following programme of work was followed:

i) Examination and consideration of issues relevant to PAROS,

ii) Existing agreements relevant to PAROS and

iii) Existing proposals and future initiatives on PAROS.

It is worth noting the large consensus in the international community, the current legal instruments concerning outer space usage do, to some extent 'prohibit and restrict the deployment of weapons, use of force as well as military activities in certain parts of space', as noted by Acheson and Fihn. However, what is a major concern to member states and scholars alike is the limited scope of some of the PAROS provisions. Indeed, with the progress of science and technology, it could very well be necessary to strengthen existing provisions.

Bloc Positions:

The majority of UN states are concerned that the weaponisation of space will lead to an arms race; indeed they also believe that a multilateral treaty is the only way to prevent such an arms race. This treaty should not limit space access but would prevent the deployment of weapons in space. The General Assembly each year a resolution on the prevention of an arms race in outer space is introduced and adopted by an overwhelming majority of member states. As a matter of fact, every country in the world votes in favor of the PAROS treaty, except the United States and Israel - which abstain.

Questions a resolution must answer

❖ How can existing legal mechanisms account for developments in the fields of science and technology?

❖ How can member states ensure transparency and cooperation in the international community?

❖ Which provisions have been introduced by member states to limit the possibility of an arms race in outer space?

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