

SPACE SECURITY: PERSPECTIVES OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Hewa Palihakkara

I have been asked to speak on the topic of space security from the perspective of developing countries. Two questions would immediately come to mind to a taxpayer of any developing country. Firstly, is not space security principally a concern for, and an interest of, space-capable or space-faring states rather than a worry for developing nations whose economic and social mobility, even on Earth, leaves much to be desired? And secondly, are not developing countries wasting their time and energy on cosmic concerns such as space security, whereas they should rather be focusing on terrestrial urgencies such as food security, social justice, security from poverty, health care, sanitation, and so forth?

To my mind, answers to both of these questions must necessarily be in the negative. This is even more the case in a time when exciting opportunities, as well as looming dangers, that can come from state and private activities in space, irrespective of whether such are conducted in a competitive or cooperative manner, have become more actual than conjectural.

As we meet in Geneva, 2007 marks half a century of space faring since the launch of Sputnik I. We also have 40 years of space treaty history behind us since the adoption of the landmark 1967 Outer Space Treaty. As we all know, this has been four decades of attempted multilateral work, rather than achievements. This is also the twenty-fifth year of the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS) issue on the agenda of the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, the most representative multilateral arms control treaty-making body in the world. I am reluctant to call the CD the single or sole multilateral negotiating body, as one may find such designations rather undemocratic! If the CD is unable to do something which is patently desirable, then other multilateral bodies or forums should be found or enabled to perform the task.

This historical perspective brings into sharper focus the significance of this conference and the negative answers which I must give to the two questions above. Developing countries have, through their consistent and persistent words as well as deeds at the national and international levels, worked purposefully to promote and conclude a treaty and other barriers against the weaponization of outer space. In the CD, the United Nations, and peace research and civil society forums, the developing countries have strongly and cohesively advocated a number of constructive ways forward on peace, security and the rule of law in outer space. These include strengthening the current legal regime for space security, examining and filling its obvious gaps and inadequacies; developing confidence-building measures (CBMs); improving transparency and record-keeping for space activities; and developing and implementing behavioural benchmarks or codes of conduct for activities in outer space. In fact, while preparing for this presentation, a search of the internet for “space security diplomacy” revealed that the developing countries and China had made six times more interventions than others on this subject at the UN. Indeed, the prime movers of the initiative to have PAROS on the CD agenda nearly a quarter of a century ago were a group of developing countries. Thereafter, Argentina, Egypt and Sri Lanka alternated in piloting the PAROS resolution in the General Assembly every year. This resolution, together with the work of the CD, or what remains of it, continue to be the principal, if not the only, body of collective intergovernmental thinking relevant to “space security diplomacy”.

These efforts ran in parallel and were complementary to the valuable contributions by others who advocated diplomacy rather than weaponry for space security, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and some European Union states. What is even more striking is that contributions made at the UN on the space security issue by these states and developing countries together outnumbered those made by the major space-faring nations by 14 times!

I would submit that the reason for this consistent advocacy by developing countries is two-fold. Firstly, the developing countries would like to ensure the principle of free and unimpaired access to the “global commons” or “the common heritage of mankind” or whatever we agree to call the last frontier of resources—that is, outer space. In its broadest sense, this rationale was encapsulated in the New Zealand representative’s statement at the CD a few weeks ago. Although not a developing country, New

Zealand articulated the valid premise that preventing the weaponization of outer space was fundamental to safeguarding all countries' ability to access space resources, both now and in the future. Therefore the preservation of a weapon-free outer space is a principal task for the CD. The future opportunities for peaceful development must not be compromised by militarization. That the Conference should look at the feasibility of a more comprehensive legal regime preventing weapons in space appears to command general agreement, but the trouble is that this remains a virtual state without transforming into a functional consensus. As suggested by many CD members, identifying gaps in the existing legal regime would provide a good starting point from which to explore whether there was agreement before proceeding with the debate on how best to fill them.

The word "militarization" would immediately trigger a familiar debate. This is well known to developing countries as a pretext for a "do-nothing" or "do-little" approach. As many in the CD have correctly pointed out, we seem to have come full circle in this debate. When restraints on militarization were attempted over 40 years ago it was said that space was already militarized with so-called 3C (command, control and communication) space assets which are needed for maintaining the stability of highly nuclearized and technology-driven security policy. Thereafter we have had a long and continuous debate on what constitutes "peaceful" and "non-aggressive" uses of outer space. Then, honest but unsuccessful attempts were made to conceptualize these efforts and harmonize these views into an approach for pre-empting the weaponization, as opposed to militarization, of space. Now we have a broader conceptualization in the form of "space security", coupled with or beginning with CBMs and transparency measures. Canada has done some very constructive work on this. The interest of developing countries is to start multilateral work on any one of these starting points, or a combination thereof, before it is again too late. As pointed out earlier, this is fundamental to the freedom of access to outer space resources, whether you call that environment the common heritage of mankind, the global commons, or even the cosmic commons!

If this does not happen soon enough, the inevitable weaponization of space security will take place in the same way that terrestrial security was weaponized. This is evident from the progression from stone age weapons to machine guns to thermonuclear bombs, along with the bewildering array of doctrines thrown into the bargain.

This brings me to my second point of the two-fold rationale for interest of developing countries in the space security issue. The developing countries are concerned that they will once again be called upon to carry the burden of nurturing and sustaining a “non-proliferation regime” for space weapons.

We have enough earthly experience in nuclear and missile proliferation to tell us that once we lift the human habit of weaponizing security into orbit and possibly beyond, we will find the feeble attempts of non-proliferation woefully inadequate to maintain our usual “international wish list” of stability, security and so forth. As it so happens, once the so-inclined space-capable countries perfect their weaponization programmes, the urge to deploy and develop doctrines for them will follow. The responsibility of non-proliferation will naturally fall on the developing countries that have no security umbrellas. History is replete with failed non-proliferation attempts in such situations. Non-proliferation cannot sustain itself in a disarmament/arms-control vacuum.

Space-lift capability, guidance and propulsion technologies have all spread very quickly. Some states that were developing countries at the onset of the space age are now space farers. More such capabilities will emerge and we all should applaud that. And more qualitative improvements will also take place. Those who argued that militarization was a reality, that the existing legal regime was adequate and that nothing more is feasible or desirable, now face the imminent danger of weaponization of space. Like its terrestrial counterpart, once space security is weaponized, proliferation will follow.

Developing countries do not want this non-proliferation burden to fall on them. They therefore advocate and want to contribute to a less expensive and more equitably enforceable prevention regime to keep outer space free of weapons as well as debris.

Let me conclude on a personal note. Having participated in multilateral arms control and disarmament efforts both at the CD in Geneva and the UN in New York since the early 1980s, even before PAROS became a CD agenda item, I was struck by the contrast between the stand-still in the arena of preventive diplomacy and the breathtaking dynamism in exploration and technological development relating to outer space. Space technology in all fields—propulsion, guidance, remote sensing, communications, orbital construction, life support systems and so forth—has shown wonderful progress and advance. This capability has not only grown qualitatively, but

has also contributed to socio-economic progress and prosperity for many countries and peoples. This is a true tribute to human endeavour, ingenuity and the quest to know more.

In contrast, when I began to prepare for this event I was dismayed to discover the depressingly familiar static diplomacy of harping on the adequacy of the existing legal regime. Outer space diplomacy seems frozen in time although technology and the dangers of weaponization seem to accelerate at full throttle!

Nearly a decade ago, on 26 February 1998, as the Sri Lankan Permanent Representative to the CD, I spoke there on PAROS and said "if we do not take collective preventive action in outer space now, we will be talking about non-proliferation in space a few years down the road."

My friend and colleague Ambassador Li Changhe of China, who was the Permanent Representative of China to the CD, echoed this caution when he spoke later and said that those who are against a CD Ad-Hoc Committee on PAROS should heed this "prudent advice" (Sri Lanka was the coordinator on PAROS in the CD at that time). Ambassador Changhe's words many years ago resonated in my mind while I was preparing these comments, not least because the Chinese anti-satellite weapon test of 11 January 2007 was indeed a stark reminder that the warnings 10 years ago were not heeded by those who believed the danger of weaponizing space security was a figment of the imagination of delegates frequenting Geneva and New York! One must remember that China's test was not the first such test and it was targeted on its own satellite. Other space powers had conducted similar or bigger tests before. It is also gratifying that China remained committed then and now to starting multilateral work on PAROS. It is still not too late to bring to fruition a multilateral process to prevent what was cautioned against 10 years ago. What was said in words of caution at that time was perhaps demonstrated in deed on 11 January. Rather than calling for explanations, the space powers will be well advised to join China and other countries to commence a multilateral process for graduated and progressive de-weaponization of space security. If we do not do this now, the UNIDIR conference on the fiftieth anniversary of the Outer Space Treaty may have to discuss non-proliferation in outer space.