

THE UN GROUP OF GOVERNMENTAL EXPERTS ON SPACE TCBMs

A SECURE WORLD FOUNDATION FACT SHEET

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In 2011, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon convened a Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-building Measures in Outer Space Activities. This small group of space experts was tasked with examining and reporting on methods for improving cooperation in space, and on reducing the risks of misunderstanding, mistrust, and miscalculations.

History and Background

The Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Transparency and Confidence-building Measures (TCBMs) in Outer Space Activities is a United Nations initiative. The UN General Assembly regularly establishes such groups to investigate emerging concerns and make recommendations. The objectives for the GGE on TCBMs in space were to improve international cooperation and reduce the risks of misunderstanding, mistrust, and miscalculations in outer space activities. The GGE on TCBMs in space originated in the UN General Assembly's First Committee, which handles security and disarmament issues. UNGA Resolution 65/68 requested in 2010 that Secretary General Ban Ki-moon establish the GGE, which he did in 2011.¹ Resolution 65/68 was sponsored by major spacefaring nations, including Russia and China. While the United States has since publicly declared its support for the process, it abstained from voting on the resolution, objecting to its mention of the Chinese-Russian draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects.² The GGE on TCBMs in space subsequently received widespread support from the international community.

Many States saw the GGE as a pragmatic way to move forward the international dialogue on space security issues. The UN Conference on Disarmament — the international negotiating body responsible for space security issues — is tasked with the prevention of an arms race in outer space. However, the Conference on Disarmament has been deadlocked and unable to hold substantive discussions for many years. Other international efforts toward space sustainability are also underway, such as the Working Group on the Long-term Sustainability of Space Activities (LTS) in the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), but focus solely on peaceful uses of outer space (whether civil, military, or dual uses).

Focus and Structure

The GGE on TCBMs in space was made up of 15 international experts nominated by Member States. The permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) were guaranteed five of these 15 spots. The remaining spots were filled by countries selected by the UN based on State applications and on fair geographic representation. They were (in alphabetical order): Brazil, Chile, Italy, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine. The Russian expert was chair of the GGE. While the GGE experts were nominated by Member States, they were expected to provide politically neutral expertise to the process. The GGE met for the first time in New York on July 23-25, 2012, for a second time in Geneva on April 1-5, 2013, and for a final time in New York on July 8-12, 2013. In developing its report, the GGE drew upon previous and ongoing space security and sustainability initiatives. A similar GGE was convened between 1991 and 1993 to examine confidence-building measures in outer space activities, and produced a report referenced in the current GGE's meetings.³ The current GGE examined existing international law regarding space (e.g., the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, its four supplemental treaties, and other international soft law instruments) along with recent Member State submissions to the Secretary General on existing space TCBMs. It also considered the proposed draft International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities, the work of the COPUOS Working Group on the Long-term Sustainability of Space Activities, and existing bilateral and multilateral TCBMs. The GGE also consulted with COPUOS, the UN Conference on Disarmament, the International Telecommunication Union, and the World Meteorological Organization.

Topics reviewed include different categories of TCBMs, implementation, and a proposed central point of contact for all space TCBMs. A few points of convergence emerged from the GGE's work, including: TCBMs are strictly voluntary in nature and

come in a variety of forms; the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs could be a good central point of contact; States and other relevant entities outside the GGE should be consulted; and that categories of TCBMs already exist (e.g. information exchanges, visits, notifications, and consultations).

The Final GGE Report

In July 2013, the GGE delivered its final report, approved by consensus, to the UN Secretary General.⁴ The UN General Assembly received and endorsed the report at its 68th session in late 2013, and encouraged UN Member States to review and implement the proposed measures through relevant national mechanisms on a voluntary basis.⁵ The report outlines conclusions and recommendations on TCBMs that can help ensure strategic stability in the space domain. It first gives an overview of global space activities and of the attention paid to the need for TCBMs in space. Section III of the GGE report provides the general characteristics and basic principles of TCBMs, and explains the nature and purpose of TCBMs, stating “in general terms, transparency and confidence-building measures are a means by which governments can share information with an aim of creating mutual understanding and trust, reducing misperceptions and miscalculations and thereby helping both to prevent military confrontation and to foster regional and global stability.” Section IV through VIII then provide specific TCBMs for space, including:

- Information exchange on national space policy and goals, and exchange of information on military space expenditures;
- Information exchange on activities in outer space, including orbital parameters, possible conjunctions, natural space hazards, and planned launches;
- Notifications on risk reductions such as scheduled maneuvers, uncontrolled high-risk re-entries, emergency situations, intentional orbital breakups; and
- Voluntary visits to launch sites and command and control centers, and demonstrations of space and rocket technologies.

International cooperation, consultative mechanisms, outreach, and coordination are also examined and encouraged as appropriate TCBMs for space. The report’s conclusion recommends that States and international organizations review, consider, and implement the GGE’s TCBMs on a voluntary basis through relevant national mechanisms, to the greatest extent practicable, and consistent with national interests. In sum, the GGE report stresses the value of continuing dialogue between agencies, governments, organizations, and through various UN forums. The GGE report seeks to change behavior by putting into place guides for action, laying down parameters of what a TCBM consists of, and of the relevant actors supporting the existing regimes (treaties and non-binding guidelines). International response to the GGE report has been positive.⁶ In March 2014, the GGE report was also presented and discussed at the UNIDIR space security conference,⁷ and was received by the UN COPUOS and its subcommittees in their 2014 sessions. A major focus going forward will be how to implement the GGE’s recommendations and any complementary activities within the other space sustainability and security initiatives.

Endnotes

1. Transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities, G.A. Res. 65/68, U.N. GAOR, 65th Sess. U.N. Doc A/RES/65/68 (Dec. 8, 2010). AVAILABLE AT: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/65/68.
2. Draft Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects, Conference on Disarmament, CD/1839 (Feb. 29, 2008). AVAILABLE AT: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=CD/1839.
3. Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space: Study on the application of confidence-building measures in outer space - Report by the Secretary General, U.N. GAOR, 48th Sess. U.N. Doc A/48/305 (Oct. 15, 1993). AVAILABLE AT: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/48/305.
4. Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in Outer Space Activities, U.N. GAOR, 68th Sess. U.N. Doc A/68/189* (July 29, 2013). AVAILABLE AT: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/189.
5. Transparency and confidence-building measures in outer space activities, G.A. Res. 68/50, U.N. GAOR, 68th Sess. U.N. Doc A/RES/68/50 (Dec. 10, 2013). AVAILABLE AT: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/50.
6. Perspective on the Importance of the GGE, Remarks by Frank A. Rose, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, Third International Symposium on Sustainable Space Development and Utilization for Humankind, Tokyo, Japan (Feb. 27, 2014). AVAILABLE AT: <http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/2014/222791.htm>.
7. Space Security 2014: Implementation and Compliance, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, (Mar. 19-20, 2014). AVAILABLE AT: <http://www.unidir.org/programmes/emerging-security-threats/space-security-2014-implementation-and-compliance>.



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