

(Mr. van Dongen, Netherlands)

We are aware of the fact that anti-satellite weapons systems are now being developed and even tested. Achievements in the field of ballistic missile defence may also serve for the development of an anti-satellite capability. Is this not then the right moment for endeavours towards further arms control in outer space? Conversely, must we fear that the possibilities are diminishing or have already ceased to exist? To find the answer, we must investigate the rationale for developing an anti-satellite capability.

Two main arguments are usually put forward. One stems from a competitive and reactive concern: to deter the use of anti-satellite weapons by the other side and to prevent an imbalance in military capabilities. The other stems from a concern of the first party with the growing use of satellites by the other side with a view to enhancing its military capability; the growing use of satellites is then perceived by the first party as constituting a sufficient threat to justify an anti-satellite programme.

It seems to us that a verifiable agreement banning anti-satellite weapons altogether will constitute a durable solution for averting arms competition in outer space only if each side's anti-satellite programme is commensurate with, not a reaction to, the other's, whether real or anticipated. We would then be dealing with the question whether we should opt for mutual satellite vulnerability or for mutual satellite invulnerability.

The choice in favour of the former, the anti-satellite weapons option, could lead to a very expensive arms race in outer space with no guarantee for increased stability, probably quite the contrary. As I mentioned before, present research efforts in the field of directed-energy weapons, both high-energy laser and particle-beam weapons, have already made it conceivable to use these new weapons for space-based ballistic missile defence. It stands to reason that such developments will have serious implications for the present international situation.

As to the question of the priority to be given to the elaboration of a prohibition of anti-satellite weapons, it is our firm belief that the prerequisites for an agreement seem to exist: no State yet seems to possess a commanding lead in the relevant technology.

In choosing the option to ban anti-satellite weapons, one would have to consider that such a ban would be a step in the right direction from an arms control point of view, but that, at the same time, it would offer protection to satellites fulfilling vital military functions. I must admit that we have to think further about that side of the coin and decide whether a mutually acceptable solution can be found. Another complicating aspect is that satellites for observation, communications, navigation, meteorology, etc. can be used both for military and for civilian purposes. We are well aware that this dual-purpose character of satellite technology does not simplify our complicated task.

These are the observations I should like to limit myself to at this stage. We hope that the results of the informal discussions that are taking place can be evaluated during the period in May and June when the Committee on Disarmament does not meet. During the summer session, the Committee on Disarmament could then deal more formally with agenda item 7 and consider setting up an ad hoc working group on the prevention of an arms race in outer space.