

(Mr. Natwar Singh, India)

Finally, another important measure which is before the Conference is the prevention of an arms race in outer space. The concept of the Strategic Defence Initiative enunciated for the first time exactly four years ago envisaged the creation of an impenetrable shield that would protect an entire territory against a missile attack by destroying all the offensive nuclear weapons. Its declared merit is to reduce the risk of a nuclear war by defensive action which would render nuclear weapons ineffective. More recent appraisals of the programme, even by those who originally propounded the idea, show up such a claim as far too optimistic. Over the past two decades, every new evolution in weaponry to counter the risks from existing nuclear forces has inevitably led to a steady development of their offensive capability. An arms race in outer space will be extremely costly, and countermeasures are likely to limit any of its possible advantages. The uncertainty created by this new arms race will have a destabilizing impact.

Current debates on the issues have a distinct ring of the past. During the course of 1932, three commissions of the Disarmament Conference, meeting perhaps in a similar council chamber, spent many weeks in a vain endeavour to classify armaments as "offensive" and "defensive". Delegates of all nations displayed extraordinary ability in holding that armaments which they chiefly relied upon were defensive, while those of their potential rivals were mainly offensive. Instead of getting into such a debate again, the Conference on Disarmament should work on specific proposals to prevent outer space from becoming the cosmic dimension of the all-too-familiar terrestrial arms race.

Through the ages, man has looked up to the skies and heavens and derived inspiration and solace. But if appropriate steps are not taken soon to prohibit the new space weapon systems under development, the same skies will take on a predatory face threatening humankind with destruction. The anti-satellite and anti-ballistic-missile systems, particle beam and laser weapons and other third-generation nuclear weapons in the offing, would aggravate considerably the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust. With its high degree of automated programming, modern weaponry is only too vulnerable to the well-documented dangers of false alarms, miscalculation and other failures in man-made systems.

In the area of preventing an arms race in outer space, priority should be accorded to halting the development of anti-satellite weapons, dismantling existing systems, prohibiting the introduction of new weapon systems in outer space and ensuring that the existing treaties safeguarding the peaceful uses of outer space, as well as the 1972 ABM Treaty, are fully honoured and extended as required in the light of new technological advances.