Problems and Prospects of Preserving Outer Space from Arms Race Escalation

By P.K. Menon*

I. Introduction

Thanks to the scientific programme organized by the International Geophysical Year (IGY), we opened our eyes to the vista of cosmos. The IGY was purely a scientific project of worldwide cooperation "in investigating the mysteries of the earth and the universe." Research on rockets and satellites was only one of the twelve scientific programmes with which the IGY was concerned. However, sensitive to the importance of achieving historical feats in space, the Soviet Union was successful in launching its first artificial earth satellite - Sputnik I - on October 4, 1957. Four months later, on January 31, 1958, the United States launched its satellite - Explorer I - into orbit. Thus started the race and rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union for the conquest of space; the stage of scientific exploration has steadily moved to that of military exploitation. At present, it is reported that two of every three satellites launched serve military purposes.

As a consequence of the space exploration, there had already been important discoveries in biology, astronomy, geophysics and astrophysics. As is the case with all scientific discoveries, practical-utilitarian applications are expected as a by-product in many other fields as well. This would add materially to the comfort and well-being of the world at large. The total value and nature of these gains to mankind are still unpredictable, but some expectations have already materialized. The potential threat of using outer space for military purposes was also visualized even before the launching of the first satellite.

Disarmament is one of the cardinal problems haunting over the mankind from time immemorial. In the past, the call for disarmament had been mainly made in the interest of economy. The objective of the release of economic resources had been enunciated since the days of Kant. Kant's contention was that the economic burden of standing armies becomes "heavy in the long run that aggressive war is undertaken to remove it".

The arms race is a waste of resources, a diversion of the economy away from its humanitarian purposes, a hindrance to national development efforts and a threat to democratic processes. In the present nuclear era, it also places all people at risk and puts in doubt the lives of future generations.

As the Delhi Declaration has correctly pointed out,

Every day we remain alive is a day of grace, as if mankind as a whole were a prisoner in the death cell awaiting the uncertain moment of execution. And like every innocent defendant, we refuse to believe that the execution will ever take place.

* Professor of Law and Director of International Law Programme, Faculty of Law, University of The West Indies, Barbados.
No doubt, the arms race would inevitably increase the prices of consumer goods and would create harmful effects on the economy of many smaller or developing countries.

In the early seventies, it was estimated that an amount of US$ 200 billion — roughly equal to about two-thirds of the income of all the developing countries — was spent annually for military purposes. In the early eighties, it was jumped to about US$ 600 billion. This means that more than $1 million is being spent on weapons every minute of every hour of every day. The on-going sophistication of weapons, for instance the United States Space Shuttle Mission and President Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative popularly known as "Star Wars" programme on the one hand and, Soviet Union's modernization of air defence network and development of anti-missile defences on the other would cause to increase the military spending faster than in the previous years, despite the deteriorating performance of the world economy.

Over three-fourths of the world's defence spending is by the two Great Powers. Emphasizing this point in particular, in his impassionate plea for disarmament at the United Nations General Assembly, what the late Soviet Premier Khrushchev said in 1959 is more true today.

General and complete disarmament would also create completely new opportunities for the assistance of states whose economies are at present still underdeveloped and stand in need of cooperation from more advanced countries. Even if only a small part of the resources released by the cessation of military expenditure on the part of the Great Powers were devoted to assisting such states, this could literally usher in a new epoch in the economic development of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Conceptually there is no sharp difference between the activities occurring in the atmosphere and on the outer space. The basic tests of a disarmament plan applicable both to the outer space and the earth remain the same. This, however, does not mean to suggest that outer space could not be protected from an arms race in the absence of accomplishing an effective arrangement for complete and general disarmament.

II. Disarmament in perspective
Subject to international agreements voluntarily concluded, every state is free to manufacture and possess weapons of any magnitude; the state is also free to use its own territory or even the high seas to test these weapons. Only if such tests cause injury to the persons or property of other states, the general principle of international law will apply invoking the doctrine of state responsibility.

General law-making treaties on the rules of warfare prohibiting certain weapons are a little more than a hundred years old beginning with the Declaration of St. Petersburg of 1868. The movement for codification of war laws gained impetus after the Franco-Prussian War 1870-71 and bore fruit in the first International Conference on War Law at Brussels in 1874. This was followed by the Hague Peace Conference of 1899 and 1907. These Conferences and Declarations made thereof did not, however, produce any significant reduction in arms.