Our Common Agenda - Policy Brief 7

For all humanity: The future of Outer Space governance

Remarks by USG Guy Ryder
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10 minutes

INTRODUCTION

Distinguished representatives of Members of the Committee and observer organizations,

I am delighted to have the opportunity of this discussion on outer space governance, a topic that is central to our concerns as we tackle the challenges of delivering the SDGs and the opportunities of the future.

That centrality has become increasingly evident in the past few years.

In the UN 75 Declaration, Governments called for a renewed multilateralism, one that strengthened global governance for the common future of present and coming generations.

Outer space governance is an issue that coming generations will look upon with great appreciation or great frustration – depending on the outcomes we collectively deliver.

And that means that this Committee has a great responsibility to those generations.

In response to the UN75 call, the Secretary-General devoted a significant section of his Our Common Agenda report to outer space governance.

In his report, he first recognized the extraordinary leadership that this Committee has provided in stewarding the five outer space treaties.

He also outlined the rapid and unprecedented changes underway in outer space and provided some high-level proposals on how the multilateral system could address them.

In follow-up to Our Common Agenda and in preparation for the Summit of the Future in 2024, the Secretary-General is publishing a set of Policy Briefs to further expand on the analyses and recommendations from that report.

The outer space policy brief, the seventh in the series, will be published by Monday, 29 May.

Without being able to call on the expertise that you all share, my purpose today is to provide you with a general overview of the Outer Space policy brief, and to answer any questions you may have on the broader process of Our Common Agenda, including the Summit of the Future.

Let me begin by acknowledging the centrality and leadership of Member States in the governance of outer space, and also acknowledge your excellent stewardship of the exploration and peaceful use of outer space to date.

This has enabled a rich and growing human presence in space and enabled numerous inspiring and innovative achievements.

ANALYSIS OF SPACE TRENDS

Over the last decade though, we have witnessed a series of remarkable changes in outer space.

The number of objects being launched into orbit is staggering. There have been more objects launched to space in the last 10 years, than there was in the previous 50 years combined.

Based on information from the ITU's Master International Frequency Register, it looks like this increase is just the beginning, and that this exponential growth in the number of objects, especially in low-earth orbit, is likely to continue over the next decade.

Where 10 years ago we had 3,000 objects launched into outer space, 10 years from now that figure could be 30,000 or more.

There are many factors contributing to this increase, including the increased rate of launches and objects from Member States, as well as the increased participation of the private sector.

These increased investments and new participants are accelerating innovation, lowering costs, and increasing the shared level of ambition across all space domains.

This includes ambition for deep-space missions. Industry, alongside their government partners are planning moon and deep space missions for the coming years. Something humanity has not achieved in over four decades.

When we look collectively at the exponential increase in the number of space objects, the accelerating growth and variety of private sector actors, and the ambition governments and industry to venture back into deep space, we must recognize the present development of governance and strength of frameworks may simply be insufficient to keep pace.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

And if governance cannot keep pace with the acceleration of activity, we may miss out on new opportunities for outer space and create new risks.

From earth observation to internet connectivity, outer space assets are presented in the Policy Brief as tools for helping the world to solve climate challenges and accelerate economic growth, two issues that are essential for developing countries and for achievement of the SDGs.

The space economy itself, worth half a trillion dollars today, is likely to triple or more in the coming decade.

But if governance does not keep pace with these rapid changes, all of this is placed in jeopardy.

Outside of a small number of governments and some private actors, it is difficult to track and support the ever-more-crowded number of objects in low earth orbit.

In the case of potential collisions between space objects, whether accidental or possibly intentional, we do not have sufficiently agreed norms and protocols.

This could lead to accidents, debris, or possibly conflict.

To seize these opportunities and mitigate these risks, the Secretary-General has proposed the development of binding and non-binding norms for space security, safety and sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These proposals are further detailed in the Policy Brief that will be published on 29 May, but before I get to the recommendations, I want to emphasize a recommendation that was not made.

What is not proposed is the creation of any new structures for governing outer space.

Through this Committee, through multilateral bodies of the General Assembly and through the ITU, we have the mandate and ability to effectively govern the new space environment.

The recommendations in the Policy Brief will encourage updated governance to keep pace with the emerging challenges.

They relate both to space sustainability and space security as well as to increased inclusion.

For the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on those that related to space sustainability governance.

In this area, the brief presents two options for consideration by this Committee, first, a single unified governance regime for space sustainability and, as a second option, a set of independent issue-specific governance frameworks.

A unified regime could foster transparency, confidence building, and importantly, the effective interoperability of space operations in earth orbit and beyond, including the Moon and other celestial bodies.

Member States remain the locus of governance, but we would encourage this regime to also incorporate a platform for broader stakeholder inclusion as also recommended in the report by the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism

The regime would address Space Traffic Management, including a framework for the coordination of space situational awareness, space object manoeuvres, and space events.

It would include norms and principals for space debris removal and a framework for space resource activities, including the sustainable exploration, exploitation, and utilization of resources on the Moon and other celestial bodies.

The Secretary-General's use of the term "unified regime" in this context is deliberately broad, giving Member States, in consultation with observer organizations and others, the flexibility to reach agreement on a unified approach best suited to their needs.

Importantly, the unity of such a regime would allow the rapid sharing of information, and coordination of actors across sets of norms and frameworks. It would also ease the administration of space frameworks.

To that end, the brief also recommends the establishment of an international mechanism to coordinate the implementation of the regime.

Though we see a unified regime as the preferred model of governance for outer space sustainability, it is recognized that consideration and agreement across this wide range of issues may progress at different rates.

For that reason, the Policy Brief contains a second option for consideration, which is the development of individual sets of governance frameworks along each of the major policy areas I have referred to.

This would be a set of independent norms and frameworks, developed and agreed on a more flexible timeline, and delivered when and where possible.

This more dispersed approach might make coordination and cooperation more challenging but its flexibility could offer scope for faster progress on some of the most pressing issues.

CONCLUSION

It is understood that these issues of space traffic coordination, debris removal, and management of space resources are already under consideration by your Scientific and Technical Subcommittee and Legal Subcommittee.

Our hope is that the Policy Brief can encourage an acceleration of processes so that agreement by Member States on new norms, frameworks, and mechanisms for these crucial issues can match and shape the rapid acceleration of space technology and ambition.

As I have noted, the Policy Brief does not prescribe the way forward for an Outer Space Dialogue or make specific recommendations regarding the Summit of the Future in 2024.

These matters are first and foremost the prerogative of Member States and what the Our Common Agenda process and Summit of the Future offer is a platform for engagement on these vital issues.

The Summit will bring together Heads of State and Ministers to agree on a Pact for the Future, it is our hope that outer space sustainability can be a leading example of the inclusive, innovative, and agile 21st century governance that can truly accelerate our global development.

If we can come together to effectively govern the changing space environment, it would be a remarkable conclusion to that objective.

Thank you for your attention.