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LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF SPACE ACTIVITIES – WIDENING THE DEBATE

Abstract

Space-based systems are used to deliver a wide range of critical services that support economic activity, sustainable development, human security and environmental security. Space applications have therefore driven growth of the space arena world-wide.

The last two decades have seen a huge increase in the number and diversity of actors involved in space activities. The proliferation of space debris, and announced plans for public sector and commercial space activities, raise concerns regarding safety within the space environment and the sustainability of space activities in the long term.

The long-term sustainability of space activities is a matter of common concern for both public and private sector entities in space-faring nations and for all nations benefiting from space applications. This issue has been receiving increasing attention in a number of space fora during the past few years and was recently adopted as an agenda item in the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UN-COPUOS). This committee provides the appropriate multilateral forum to discuss such questions. Such a discussion is informed by the existing Principles and Treaties relating to outer space activities, as well as best practices recognised by the international community.

The Chairman of COPUOS during 2006-2007, Gérard Brachet (France), proposed in a working paper titled “Future role and activities of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space” (A/AC.105/L.268 and Corr. 1) that the Committee take up the issue of the long-term sustainability of space activities. At its fifty-second session, in June 2009, the Committee agreed that the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee of COPUOS should include, starting from its forty-seventh session in February 2010, a new agenda item titled “Long-term sustainability of outer space activities.”

The discussion at this session led to the formation of a Working Group within the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee to consider the issue. This paper will present the salient points and perspectives of the issue and review the progress of the deliberations in COPUOS to date.

Given the crosscutting nature of this issue, the deliberations in COPUOS will be strengthened and enriched by inputs from a wide range of actors in the global space community. It is hoped that the presentation of this paper at the IAC will stimulate further discussion and encourage informed debate on this important issue.