

28th SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE POLICY, REGULATIONS AND ECONOMICS (E3)
Assuring a Safe, Secure, and Sustainable Space Environment for Space Activities (4)

Author: Mrs. Aurélie Trur
Graduate Institute for Policy Studies GRIPS Tokyo, Japan

BEYOND THE SPACE COMMONS: AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING SPACE
DEBRIS GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS

Abstract

Space activities have played an important role in international affairs since the onset of the space age. Satellite applications developed significantly throughout the post-Cold War era and rendered space assets essential for the well-functioning of today's society, supporting the world's economy, development and international security. However, threats to accessing or using outer space as an environment and space assets as a resource have dramatically increased over the past few years as revealed by the 2007 and 2009 orbital collisions. Moreover, mega-constellations are under development and experts have recently warned that the debris population is nearing the tipping point, which could trigger the Kessler effect. A series of multilateral mitigations and remediation initiatives have gained momentum in various fora to address the pressing issue. Though debris governance remains a daunting challenge hindered by power politics and conceptual limitations. Indeed, the Conference on Disarmament has been in a deadlock for years, failing to agree on a treaty. The International Code of Conduct is making progress, yet some parties disagree and it remains to be negotiated and signed. As for the efforts on 'rules of the road' for ensuring long-term space sustainability at the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), a plethora of additional guidelines have been suggested creating further delays. Meanwhile, space continues to be more congested and contested, calling for further analysis of debris governance. An emerging strand of literature on debris governance is drawing from environmental studies and regime theory, conceptualizing space as a 'global common'. This paper argues that while this strand represents a useful starting point for reflection, some of its core concepts remain controversial and address only parts of the issue. This study aims to complete the existing scholarship with an alternative framework providing a more comprehensive and less contested view. The proposed framework will be based on a 'gaps' model, stemming from global governance studies and developed from a cross-sectorial analysis of the United Nation's three core activities of international security, development and human rights. Bearing in mind that debris issues overlap more than one of these categories, this framework entails promising elements for the evaluation of progresses and limitations of space debris governance and sustainability efforts.