Key Findings
Asia Pacific Space Diplomacy Dialogue (APSDD)
An official side-event to the Asia Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum APRSAF Online 2020
December 1, 2020 (US) | December 2, 2020 (Japan)

On December 1 2020, Pacific Forum, in partnership with the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI-APCSS) and the University of Hawaii at Manoa Department of Asian Studies, held the "Asia Pacific Space Diplomacy Dialogue." This was an official side-event of the Asia Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum (APRSAF) Online 2020 and aimed to harness the growing momentum for regional space cooperation by exploring its prospects and challenges.

This virtual event convened a diverse set of experts from key space agencies, governmental bodies, academia, private sector, and civil society organizations from the United States, Japan, Australia, Singapore, and the Pacific Island States. They assessed the current space development interests of regional groupings in the Indo-Pacific; examined the applications of space-based technology for functional areas of cooperation; explored public-private partnerships in space activities; and suggested a way forward for space diplomacy in the region.

Key Findings

The concept of "space diplomacy" is an underutilized, underappreciated and undervalued aspect in the problem-solving toolkit for space security and space development issues. Media headlines reveal the current characterization of the space environment as congested, contested and competitive. States are no longer the dominant player in low-orbit space as their primacy has been contested by an increasing number of private entities investing in space exploration. The breakthrough of companies such as SpaceX in launching satellites through its development of reusable delivery system that emphasizes the operational focus of private industry in economizing space-related missions while the increasing frequency of launches serves to make space a more crowded place. As a result, the growing number of space actors combined with rapid innovation in space technology make Space Situational Awareness, Space Traffic Management, and Debris Management Mitigation integral elements in the space diplomacy agenda.

Space is a global commons, but serious obstacles for international cooperation abound. First, the lack of transparency surrounding the development of dual-use space technologies limits cooperation and reinforces the existing space security dilemma. Second, the divide between "technology" and "politics" inhibits multilateral cooperation. Significant progress has been

achieved among technology experts in producing feasible initiatives for cooperation. The United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) remains the primary multilateral body in reaching technical agreements, and to some extent, scoping best practices. Specialized organizations such as the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee also contribute technical committee-based consensus-making on rules for space through productive regulation/risk management solutions. However, despite such momentum, once technical agreements have been reached within the political arena, there is a tendency for negotiations to collapse due to geopolitical differences. Third, there is an underlying tension between the government and the private sector stemming from the innovations in space exploration technologies by private organizations outpacing state policy development. This gap creates gray areas and uncertainty in space laws and policy implementation. In this regard, there is mounting concern in the space industry about how international laws could potentially restrict its growth and stifle existing free market enterprise. Public/private dialogue on the intersection between technological innovation and policy development is therefore crucial.

Public and Private Partnerships (PPP) are also gaining traction as the demand for both cost-saving and innovation intensifies in space-based missions. In the space industry, PPP broadly encompasses research and development, procurement, acquisition, operations, and/or data sharing. Specific activities include space transportation, imagery, commercial satellites, awareness, space traffic management, etc. PPP can also play a crucial role in solving the salient issues on space debris management and shape the voluntary compliance mechanisms on space cooperation.

An unfolding Space Race 2.0 between the US and China has further complicated space cooperation against the backdrop of deteriorating international stability. Such circumstances make the imperative for space diplomacy highly critical if the international community aims to protect low-orbit space as a global common, and ultimately, prevent outright conflict. While there are existing tools for space cooperation, most are still state-centric in nature. Based on the virtual conference discussions, the contemporary space industry is now being driven by the private sector both from large corporations and emerging players from the start-up community. Civil and military players are being outnumbered, which creates urgency in finding novel methods of interface and dialogue among all stakeholders.

In the course of bilateral, regional, and multilateral fora, Track 1 diplomacy has been a constant fixture. Yet it can be argued that Track 2 diplomacy offers far more stimulating engagements. As exemplified by the APSDD, Track 2 diplomacy—which is devoid of the pomp and posture of official government engagements—can facilitate norm-building, confidence-building, and trust among stakeholders. Nurturing a constant and regular cycle of conversation and debate generates momentum for norm-shaping and norm-building from the ground up, which form building blocks in Track 1 engagements.

Integrating the substantive discussions of the forum, the APSDD advances four key takeaways:

(1) In terms of capacity-building in ASEAN and the Pacific Island Countries, education and human resource development combined with technology sharing and cooperation will remain fundamentally important for future growth.

(2) Information-sharing and data-sharing will define future areas of growth in space technology applications such as disaster management, climate change mitigation, smart agriculture, fisheries management, and health management.

(3) Collaboration will be important to tailor engagements that better serve the target audience. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, integrating a more nuanced and sensitive outlook on political, economic, and socio-technological maturity will allow states and private actors to achieve mutual goals.

(4) Diversifying outreach to new and emerging players such as start-ups and entrepreneurs and including them in the discussion will be paramount for future APSDD. Broadening the aperture will cultivate inclusivity and establish a more substantive and well-rounded debate on international rulemaking and partnership in space diplomacy.

This report was prepared by Mark Manantan. For more information, please contact Crystal Pryor [crystal@pacforum.org]. The findings reflect the view of the organizers; this is not a consensus document.

An official side-event of:

APRSAF Online 2020
ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL SPACE AGENCY FORUM