

Summary Report on Discussion segment of the OSI Webinar “Canada and the OEWG on Reducing Space Threats” February 10, 2022

The far-ranging discussion reflected the diversity of the participants’ interests and the rich menu of issues raised by the presenters. A prominent theme was that of partnership between government and other stakeholders if coherent and effective policies in support of outer space security were to be achieved. A consensus seemed to exist among civil society and industry in favour of responsible state behaviour in outer space, but to realize agreements at the international level would require state “champions”. Allusion was made to past Canadian diplomatic leadership on international security issues and the necessity to move beyond expressions of support for particular measures to building the coalitions required to get them accepted. The desirability of a “whole of Government” approach for Canada on space policy was noted and the extra months now available before the first substantive session of the OEWG in May should be put to good use.

The role of the private sector in helping to shape space policy was a salient topic with various comments as to why the evident interest of the private sector to preserve outer space for safe and secure operations didn’t seem to translate into greater engagement with governments. The extensive and only partially successful efforts to get industry onboard with the OSI’s Open Letter on banning destructive ASAT tests was recalled. The reluctance of industry to take a public stance on issues perceived as “political” was noted although it was also observed that industry recognizes the threat posed by destructive ASATs and the private sector usually is not shy about lobbying governments when its commercial interests are concerned. The interest of the insurance industry in promoting safe space operations could be another constituency with a motivation to advocate for responsible state behaviour. Within civil society, citizen interest groups could also be mobilized in support of preventive measures.

The Global South is increasingly engaged in outer space affairs and many developing countries are quite aware of the importance of space-enabled services for their further development. It was recalled that Ecuador’s first satellite was disabled as a result of a collision with space debris and that several Latin American countries have been traditionally active on the PAROS file. The G77 states plus China represent a majority within the UN supportive of PAROS. Among potential “middle-power” partners for Canada in space diplomacy would be the UK, certain EU states, Mexico, Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, Japan and India.

Although it was disappointing that the initial work of the OEWG on reducing space threats has been delayed and some geo-political tensions were already evident in its proceedings, it was argued that stakeholders should not conclude that progress in this multilateral forum is not possible. Some of the most important security accords of the Cold War period came in the immediate wake of major crises in East-West relations. It will be necessary to start developing a holistic national space policy, well informed by discussions with non-governmental stake

holders, in order for Canada to maximize its influence on the OEWG and help realize its potential.