

Enabling the safe, secure and sustainable use of Outer Space

A warm welcome to His Excellency, Premier Stephen Marshall of South Australia, Her Excellency, High Commissioner Jo Tyndall of New Zealand, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Firstly, let me say how great it is to see you all here in Singapore. And to this Track 1.5 Wilton Park conference on Outer Space.

Wilton Park is an executive agency of the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office and delivers conferences from its base in Sussex, England. They have been organising conferences on space for many years that have focused on technical and regulatory solutions for operating in space.

At our Wilton Park event in April last year, we looked at how our conduct of space activities affects other operators and the space environment. There were representatives from Brazil, India, Russia and Turkey in addition to those who had attended before and we learned a lot from listening to multiple views.

This is the first time we have taken these Wilton Park space discussions outside the UK and to this new audience. So thank you for being here.

I am most grateful to the support shown by our Australian and New Zealand colleagues and to Secure World Foundation, an independent think tank. We have ten ASEAN nations represented in this room plus other Asian nations including China, India, Japan, Pakistan and the Republic of Korea and of course our friends from the United States. We hope that this is the start of a new conversation on space and that there will be more events like this one.

We want this conversation to be inclusive. We want it to be frank and free and to recognise that the space environment is changing rapidly. And that means that the international community needs to respond and develop its thinking.

This past year saw:

- A test of a cutting-edge system of a harpoon and a net used in space to capture debris for the first time. They were deployed by the UK with the European Space Agency.
- The first life extension satellite launched by a US company bringing in to use this novel technology.
- The first landing on the dark side of the moon, by China.

- Starlink and OneWeb mega constellation satellites start to be launched in to space. These cause us to take a second look at space traffic management.

These developments reflect the fact that outer space matters because our economy and security depend on the safe, secure and sustainable use of Outer Space.

We rely on space for position, navigation and timing signals for our economy such as for banking data and to allow our militaries to operate.

We broadcast television from space. We send civil and military satellite communications through space. And we use earth observation data from satellites to improve agriculture and fight climate change.

Each of our nations aspire to grow and increase the wealth of its citizens. To do so, we all need safe and secure-access to systems in space. It's in all of our interests to find ways to reduce the threats to our space systems. And it's therefore vital that we develop a common understanding of the threats to space operations and a common lexicon for talking about it.

Some of this is about dealing with the unique nature of space. This is an environment that presents far more challenges than those we find on earth.

Collisions can happen on land or sea as they can and do in space. But collisions in space – or conjunctions, as they are known – can have more far reaching consequences than their terrestrial equivalents.

Conjunctions, intentional or not, create debris. That debris presents a threat whether it is a lifeless rocket body, a speck of paint or a dead satellite. We therefore need to do all we can to reduce the risk of such incidents.

Some of the threat is also down to the fact that new technologies have been developed that can damage or disrupt our space-based infrastructure. Some of these capabilities, such as anti-satellite missiles, are clearly military in nature. Others, such as powerful lasers, could have both military and civilian uses. So how should we ensure that we avoid misunderstandings in this new domain?

The current international legal regime, including the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, was drawn up in a different technological era. It did not foresee many of the developments that are now a reality. That is not a reason to reopen the Treaty. But nor should that stop us from working together to agree practical measures that would help make the space environment safer and more secure.

We have seen good progress in Vienna, at the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, or COPUOS. In June, COPUOS agreed 21 guidelines for the Long Term Sustainability of Space.

The UN General Assembly adopted the Guidelines by consensus in November.

These set minimum standards and good practice for space operators. They demonstrate that the international community can agree better ways of working together with goodwill from all sides.

This should provide inspiration for discussions on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) under the UN Disarmament Committee in New York and the Conference of Disarmament in Geneva. With a more open and inclusive conversation, we hope that these discussions in Singapore will help inform those bodies. And we hope that we will find new ways to support the peaceful uses of space while recognising that this is an environment that is increasingly congested – and one in which new technologies are constantly coming online.

Today, the sessions will look at some of the practical problems of operating in space. And tomorrow you will be invited to suggest possible solutions.

This gives you all a real opportunity to explore practical measures for better communication between nations: directly, in normal times and at times of stress; to express our intent before we act; and to look at how behaviours are themselves a form of communication.

I know you will also look at how these ideas could be taken forward with other nations after the conference. And our intention is to work with partners to repeat this conference with other regional groups.

This conference is designed to enable a different, more open style of discussion, away from formal statements and to try to build a better understanding of what you are all thinking. So please do make the most of this setting to learn, engage with us and challenge our assumptions.

I wish you all the very best of luck.