

Summary Report of the 21st Republic of Korea-United Nations Joint Conference on Disarmament and Non-proliferation Issues

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Organized by

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Overview

The 21st Republic of Korea-United Nations Joint Conference was held in Seoul from 3-4 November 2022, under the theme “Assessing the future disarmament landscape: space security and missile development”. The conference featured over forty expert participants representing governments, thinktanks, academia and international organizations. The conference was convened under the Chatham House rule in three moderated sessions. Each session was comprised of presentations by two panellists facilitated by a moderator followed by an exchange of views and Q&A among the panellists and participants.

This document summarizes the key discussions and takeaways of the conference regarding space threats. The Republic of Korea shares this document as reference to the third meeting of the UN Open-ended Working Group on Space Threats. The views expressed in the summary report do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Republic of Korea or the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.

Session 1: Analysis of current status and discussions on space security in international fora

Presentations

Panellists highlighted several ongoing trends that have been affecting the security of outer space activities over recent years. Key factors that were identified included the disagreement over the traditional versus behavioural approaches for space security, State policies that regard outer space as domain of conflict and the insufficient implementation of transparency and confidence measures.

Panellists also highlighted that there is an increasing urgency for the elaboration and implementation of measures to prevent any armed conflict or an arms race in relation to outer space. Panellists reaffirmed that the current trends in outer space consist of the 3Cs: ‘contested,

congested and competitive’. Signs included the development of large constellations, the growing population of debris and the testing offensive and defensive space capabilities. One panellist added a fourth concept, ‘confrontational’, but stated that ‘cooperation, collaboration and communication’ would be key to overcoming this fourth “C”. One speaker noted that the attitude of certain states to take an ‘all-or-nothing’ approach to concluding international arrangements on outer space security was adversely affecting the ability to make progress on these issues. Rather than focusing on concluding legally binding measures, the speaker advocated that a stepwise approach focused on building normative framework of responsible behaviour would serve as positive incremental gains that could eventually make great strides. There was general agreement among the participants that binding and non-binding approaches are complementary and should be pursued in parallel.

The need for building transparency and confidence measures in outer space activities to address emerging risks was called for. One speaker argued that with the development of “hostile” national space policies have been contributing to misperceptions among great powers, which can imperil the safety and security of outer space activities. They elaborated that to address these issues, certain risk reduction measures should be undertaken without delay to ensure the safe and sustainable use of outer space. Registration practices of planned launches and increased transparency and information sharing between states were argued to be among the most effective tools to mitigate the most dangerous risks. Increased adherence to, and universalization of, notification or information sharing regimes such as the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation was identified as potential ‘low-hanging fruit’ in this regard.

Panellists also presented on the role of UN bodies and forums. They noted that UN bodies dealing with space safety, security and sustainability included the General Assembly (including its First and Fourth Committees), the Open-ended working group on reducing space threats, the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, the Disarmament Commission and the Conference on Disarmament. They considered the planned multi-stakeholder dialogue on outer space at the 2024 Summit of the Future as important opportunity for advancing the future governance of outer space activities. Both speakers regarded the joint meetings of the First and Fourth Committees of the General Assembly as positive steps towards improving coordination among UN bodies. It was also argued that the engagement of the Sixth Committee of the General Assembly should be included in the joint meetings as well, as legal issues were becoming increasingly relevant.

The lack of an agreed definition for what constitutes a space weapon was regarded a significant challenge for the development of a legally binding instruments on the prevention of an arms race in outer space (PAROS). One speaker noted that this term can be extremely broad, as nearly any space-based object falling out of orbit could potentially constitute a weapon. They also argued that ground-based space systems should also receive greater priority.

Discussion

The discussion segment addressed the scope of continued deliberations on PAROS, the vulnerability of nascent space-faring nations and the role of the private sector in space security.

Discussants questioned the framing of PAROS, given that the issue has been deadlocked in international forums for decades. They further noted that perhaps outer space does not need to be

treated as a special environment distinct from the various terrestrial domains, and that the international community should consider moving beyond the traditional approach toward PAROS and focus on building norms of responsible behaviour. In response, one of the panellists argued that these approaches were not mutually exclusive and could be pursued in parallel. While it is true that the politization of PAROS has resulted in deadlock, engaging in an “either-or” mindset on the topic would only continue to paralyze progress.

Noting the important role of the United Nations and other multilateral forums, including the joint meetings of the first and fourth Committees of the General Assembly and the Open-Ended Working Group, many participants agreed that as long as there is sufficient coordination between these mechanisms, the availability of these platforms would contribute positively to the creation of norms on the space security. Participants also noted the importance of reinforcing the international regulatory framework on outer space, noting the limited resources of the United Nations to effectively manage the register of objects launched into outer space.

Many participants highlighted the vulnerability of emerging space nations. Space, it was argued, is the common heritage of all humanity and essential to our survival as a species. Space activities contribute to climate change mitigation, economic opportunities, and many other benefits. In this regard, there was general agreement that emerging space nations should participate actively in inclusive dialogue on the outer space security.

Participants further agreed on the difficulties of verification in outer space, and that the international community should approach the issue of verification through improved confidence-building measures, space situational awareness (SSA) and cooperation with the private sector.

On private sector engagement, many participants agreed on the importance of including industry in international discussions and criticized some States for not wanting to engage. Some participants, however, cautioned that the political and military concerns discussed in international forums are the prerogative of States.

Session 2: Expectations for the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours

Presentations

The presentations in this session focused on expectations for the open-ended working group on reducing space threats through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours (OEWG) as well as on general aspects of the concept of responsible behaviour in outer space. Panellists pointed out that discussions on outer space security have been at a standstill due to difference in perception of threats and their mitigation measures, and expressed hopes that the OEWG would focus on closing this gap in perception. Noting the large and growing role of the private sector in outer space activities, one panellist welcomed the OEWG’s engagement with non-state actors. Panellists also welcomed the recent US-led commitment against destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing, which could be transformed into a generalized international norm. It was emphasized that new norms could be built up over time and form the basis for the new law, as was seen in the development of the Outer Space Treaty. Panellists also considered that the 2024 Summit

of the Future could be an important opportunity to elevate the outcomes of the intergovernmental processes and to engage broader stakeholders.

Panellists described various actions that could constitute responsible behaviours in outer space, including a commitment not to conduct destructive anti-satellite tests, pre-launch notifications of all space launches, transparency regarding policies and planned activities in outer space, non-interference with national technical means of verification, implementing existing guidelines for debris mitigation, including for military activities, and avoiding any deliberate creation of orbital debris. Highlighting the role of private sector in the current dynamic development of outer space technology, panellists also noted that strengthened norms on space security and its continued adherence would facilitate the active pursuit of technology development by the private sector and its continued investment in outer space. It was further noted that at present there is significant research, development and testing of a wide range of destructive & non-destructive counter-space capabilities by multiple States, which is perceived as an obstacle to the peaceful exploration and use of outer space. It was regarded as especially important for these States to adopt measures for responsible behaviours.

Discussions

During the discussion segment, participants focused on space situation awareness (SSA), debris mitigation and the need for better communication and transparency regarding outer space activities.

Many participants welcomed the draft General Assembly resolution introduced by the United States calling for national commitments not to carry out destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile tests. The participants also stressed the importance of SSA, not only to identify objects, but also to contextualize patterns of behaviour. Information sharing and communication was highlighted as the major first step in building confidence among States. Furthermore, sharing SSA information among States was highlighted as major contributor to building a common understanding of what constitutes regular or irregular behaviour in outer space.

There was general agreement that any intentional actions to create long-term space debris would be irresponsible and harmful to all space actors. It was argued that the intentional creation of such debris should be minimized. Finally, several participants argued that the major space-faring actors should make efforts to improve the inclusivity of international policy dialogues, in order to avoid gatekeeping emerging space nations on critical matters that affect their interests in outer space. It was again reiterated that an “all or nothing” approach to norms development would not result in tangible benefits and that a greater emphasis should be placed on communication and transparency measures.

Note. Summary of the Session 3 of the conference dedicated to the DPRK nuclear issue is not included in this paper as it is irrelevant to the work of the OEWG.