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Security Nexus Perspectives

## OCEANIA'S POTENTIAL ROLE IN SPACE GOVERNANCE DEVELOPMENT?

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*Abstract:* Focusing on its unique attributes as a sub-region with a strong history of regionalism, shared interests and successful cooperation, this paper explores Oceania's potential to generate sub-regional momentum supportive of aspirations at a global level seeking further refinements to the international space governance architecture. A contribution of this nature will come at a timely juncture as progress in these efforts has unfortunately slowed. Harnessing several space-related cooperative opportunities in the sub-region, Oceania may have a unique opportunity to contribute to the development of norms and legal frameworks that may ultimately serve as foundational elements of an emerging global consensus.

It may seem incongruous to speak of space and Oceania together. Somehow, the juxtaposition of high-tech space missions against a commonly held vision of relaxed, sunny, palm-fringed beaches, just seems odd. Yet, in these unusual times we live in, the connection may be more important than we realize. At a time of heightened geopolitical competition across multiple domains, Oceania can assume a very helpful role assisting the United States and like-minded nations in a strategic contest shaping the governance of these domains. Whether with reference to maritime, air, or cyber, these commonly accepted "rules-of-the-road" are crucial foundations supporting the international rules-based order. In the case of space – recently revived in the United States as an area of high strategic priority – this challenge is of even greater significance. With rapidly escalating interest and activity on this new frontier, the inherited governance norms once appropriate to the dawn of the space age have come under increasing stress and challenge.

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Oceania may be uniquely poised to contribute to this ongoing process of governance evolution, in a manner upholding long and widely-shared international views about the uses of space.

This present relevance of Oceania goes far beyond what, for many, might be the typical way of associating a strategic domain such as space, with the smaller island states in this sub-region. All too often, such connections are unfortunately cast as an aspect of a rivalrous “checkbook diplomacy” and competition for diplomatic recognition between Taiwan and the Peoples’ Republic of China (PRC). The story around Kiribati offers an instructive example (Clarke 2019, Lyons 2019).

In this telling, up to 2003, Kiribati accorded the PRC diplomatic recognition, and during that time, a satellite tracking station was constructed in support of PRC space missions, most notably, the spaceflight of Yang Liwei, the first Chinese astronaut. The subsequent withdrawal of that recognition in favor of Taiwan resulted in the mothballing of the tracking station. Now, fast-forward to September 2019 and a time of intensifying geostrategic rivalry in the Pacific. In a week many observers agree was stunning in Pacific international relations, both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched from recognizing Taiwan to the PRC once again. In both instances, this change in diplomatic recognition was accompanied by widespread speculation and allegations concerning PRC pressure and inducements, compounded by accusations of high-level political malfeasance. For Kiribati, reports also immediately began to surface speculating on the re-opening of the mothballed satellite tracking station, and the potential ramifications for regional and international security (Liu 2019). To thicken the plot, on a wave of intense domestic opposition to the 2019 diplomatic switch and questionable procedural issues around it, the elections of April 2020 wiped out the parliamentary majority of the governing party headed by President Taneti Maamau, foreshadowing a potential parliamentary initiative reversing PRC recognition (Pala 2020). Presidential elections are due shortly in June 2020, and if present public sentiment is any indicator, this might result in a doubling of the political setback the PRC has already suffered, possibly derailing its diplomatic standing entirely, and with that, any plans that may have existed around a revival of a PRC space presence in Kiribati.

While important and fascinating, these twists and turns in Kiribati only partially uncover the potential Oceania might offer in a current context where the international rules-based order is under increasing challenge. Focusing on a zero-sum game of diplomatic recognition is certainly valid, and might yield some insight, but it also distracts. What is missed is the wider potential for Oceania to play a *positive*-sum role, catalyzing a group of like-minded nations with shared interests, in shaping norms and contributing to the strengthening of the rules-based order. A crucial step in re-orienting thinking to discover aspects of this potential contribution is to acknowledge that space can potentially play a vital role in the security and development of Oceania – these benefits are not the exclusive preserve of larger powers concerned with geostrategic issues. In current narratives, it is as if the sub-region exists only as backdrop against which geopolitical contests and maneuvers are played out, with the objects of contestation – such as space – not having any bearing, relevance or connection to the real lives lived there. But space does matter to Oceania. And in overlooking this point, a crucial opportunity is missed to engage more fully and substantively with the sub-region to build a wider constituency of interest and support, around shared strategic interests and priorities.

Oceania is a huge geographical sub-region, spanning large tracts of ocean, with all the challenges of distance and isolation these features imply. It is also a sub-region facing several existential challenges, to include climate change and severe weather events that ravage the region with increasing frequency and ferocity. Space capabilities and applications across myriad fields can play vital roles addressing these challenges. Satellite-assisted telecommunications, for example, is one important area, shrinking distance and opening up new possibilities. It is an area rich in collaborative potential with the entry of a diverse range of private sector players leveraging the latest technological advances and capabilities. Similarly, in addressing shared awareness across the marine expanse of the sub-region, but especially in search and rescue missions as well as protecting exclusive economic zones and countering illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, space links can be helpful, if not essential. And finally, as a sub-region often afflicted by severe weather events, space capabilities and applications can play important roles in storm forecasting and tracking, and where disasters strike, assisting in humanitarian operations.

This expanding array of opportunities in Oceania coincides with a challenging juncture in ongoing international discussions relating to space norms and governance. Over the last decade and more, various international forums have sought to reach consensus on a range of frameworks encouraging responsible conduct in space. Unfortunately, such consensus has proved elusive. In 2015, for example, an effort to establish an International Code of Conduct (ICoC) collapsed, with ensuing years seeing little agreement on how this might be revived. Instead, greater division appears to have emerged, in a context rendered even more complex with rapid technological developments and an increasing diversity of players, not to mention a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. This dramatic change in fortunes has led many observers to suggest that a return to a more basic confidence-building stage may be warranted to reestablish a fresh platform and renewed momentum behind a discussion of norms and governance (Vedda and Hayes 2018). In this respect, attention is often drawn to a series of proposals for Transparency and Confidence Building Measures (TCBMs) set out in a 2013 report of the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on TCBMs in Outer Space (United Nations 2013). Though modest, these now assume a far greater significance with the failure of the ICoC and changed geopolitical context.

Vedda and Hays (2018) have previously suggested that to advance such TCBMs, a group of states (perhaps in concert with private sector players) could convene a meeting to explore the implementation of proposals similar to those recommended in the GGE report. Initiating momentum in this manner – no matter how small – is crucial at a time when formalized high-level dialogue is proving unproductive. Moreover, playing to traditional ways in which international norms and governance regimes have historically been developed, successive meetings of this nature can, in a bottom-up manner over time, evolve practices, national laws and non-legally binding international arrangements, as important precursors to the eventual establishment of legally binding international agreements. In an indirect and incremental way working with like-minded partners, it may thus be possible to reignite much needed momentum in addressing space governance.

Oceania might be well placed and qualified to play a very helpful role in this regard. As spoken of before, it is a sub-region where numerous space-related opportunities exist. In addition, it is also one where there is a deep and long history of regionalism, unity and shared purpose – the “like-mindedness” mentioned above, essential to finding common ground. Informed by the TCBM proposals recommended in the UN GGE

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report, and drawing on a sample of regionally-relevant space-related opportunities, it is conceivable for an initial non-binding, Track 2 discussion to be convened in this sub-region exploring the feasibility of developing these opportunities further, as vehicles and exemplars of transparency and confidence-building. One might even imagine, following further progress, that participating partners may later elect to elevate this to a regional discussion at the Pacific Islands Forum. With the concurrence of member nations, it might be possible to share this valuable experience among the wider membership through, for example, the inclusion of a work item in the Boe Declaration Action Plan for the development of recommended and shared guidelines for member nations' consideration as they develop regulatory frameworks governing space and space applications. Finally, as national frameworks eventually coalesce around a shared standard, the basis may emerge for a regional arrangement, and perhaps later still, potentially even an agreement, supportive of the international rules-based regime.

We are currently poised at a critical threshold in the development of space governance. The future course of that development shows worrying signs of becoming increasingly antagonistic and adversarial. With its unique history, tradition, and culture, Oceania has the potential to light a different way forward emphasizing shared values, cooperation, and collaboration. Seizing this opportunity will likely be a development welcomed by many.

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