



Security Nexus Perspectives

PARTNERSHIPS AND SOFT POWER IN SPACE

By Dr. Alfred Oehlers *

Much commentary has accompanied the rollout of Space Force and Space Command in the United States (U.S.). To date, attention has largely focused on important legislative, policy, budgetary and organizational issues, as well as the technological advances and capabilities to be developed in the future to ensure U.S. strategic pre-eminence in this vital domain. Perhaps less examined has been the place and role of allies and international partners in the evolving space mission. This latter deserves much further exploration, especially if the U.S. is to successively cohere and lead an international ensemble of like-minded nations charting the future of space security.

In a comment soon after his appointment as head of U.S. Space Command, General John “Jay” Raymond drew attention to the significance of such international relationships. While highlighting existing connections such as those with Five-Eyes intelligence partners Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, a wider cast of nations was also mentioned, including France, Japan, and Germany. With the rapid diffusion of space capabilities around the world, it was acknowledged this would be a list that will only grow: “We absolutely are open for new partnerships...; I mentioned the countries that we’re working very closely with today, but we are looking forward to continuing to expand that. That’s one of the priorities of the command.” (Quoted in Mehta 2019.). Consistent with such thinking, a new Chief Partnership Office was recently established in U.S. Space Force charged with furthering operational capabilities and partnerships with the nations mentioned above, and others to emerge in time (see e.g., Mayfield 2020).

Higher-level guidance has similarly emphasized the significance of such international partnerships. The *Defense Space Strategy* released in June 2020, for example, recognizes that despite the superior technological capabilities of the U.S., space is not something the U.S. can, nor should, pursue alone. There is acknowledgement that partnerships with like-minded space-faring nations will be crucial, but besides this, other partners too, simply because space is too important a domain and commons affecting the future of

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humankind to be left to a handful. Rules and norms governing this commons are in urgent need of development and refinement, as are various architectural elements enabling regular dialogue and consensus to enhance collective security. Assigning one of four lines of effort solely to “cooperation”, the *Strategy* speaks of greater burden-sharing with allies and partners, together with efforts developing and leveraging a wider spectrum of cooperative opportunities to include policy, strategy, capabilities and operational realms (U.S. Department of Defense, 2020).

In our current strategic moment defined by Great Power Competition, these international partnerships and relationships will be vitally significant. Acknowledging we have just commenced efforts in this crucial arena and there is more progress to come, there are, however, a number of important issues to bear in mind as we move forward.

By its very nature as a high technology endeavor, but reinforced also by the preponderant lead enjoyed by the U.S. in space-related technical fields, it is not surprising to see technology-oriented engagements in the forefront leading partnership development. On the Defense side, a doctrinal emphasis on a warfighting mission for Space Force and Command raises the bar even further, with a premium placed on technical compatibility and interoperability for operational collaboration and effectiveness, accentuating this high technology bent (see e.g., U.S. Space Force 2020). To be sure, these in themselves need not necessarily be bad things. Space technology-related connections and military-to-military space defense interfaces are powerful levers, as are the myriad other scientific, technical, information, intelligence, exercises and other exchanges that can occur in this broad area to advance partnerships.

In going forward, however, we must remain cognizant of the potential limitations and pitfalls inherent in such “exclusivity”. Frankly, the number of nations capable of sustaining such high technology-oriented defense relationships with a meaningful degree of scope, depth and reciprocity for the U.S., are likely to remain few and far between for some period of time (the list mentioned above, for example, probably will retain currency for some years to come, save perhaps, for the addition of India). Most other nations of the world with some investment in space, moreover, do not always possess a distinct “defense” aspect to their activities. That is not to say they are uninterested in the security dimensions of space. Just that in their cases, leadership is typically vested in civilian agencies concerned with meteorology, disaster management, law enforcement, or other security-related functional areas, but not the military. In adopting a narrower aperture in our approach to partnership development, therefore, there is a risk of inadvertently confining ourselves to a restricted field of potential partners, predetermined on the basis of advanced technological capability and military leadership in space security. From the standpoint of building wider space security partnerships, coalitions and alliances, that will be unfortunate.

There are valuable gains to be won by reaching out to these many other nations either lacking in space capabilities or with civilian-led space security-related sectors. For example, in a context of strategic competition and aggressive initiatives such as the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor led by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a broadening of our partnership aperture might help in alerting partner nations and articulating an alternative avoiding deeper economic dependence on the PRC, and hence, exposure to malign leverage (see e.g., Chase 2019, Bubna 2020). It enables also widened audiences and more effective messaging around a fact-based narrative exposing PRC falsehoods concerning their

“development”-focused agenda generating “win-win” outcomes, while concealing controversial aspects of its space programs such as its many intersections with military and intelligence applications (see e.g., Arcesati 2019). Offering counter-narratives against PRC allegations of U.S. designs to “dominate” and “militarize” space, will also be priorities. Last but not least, a widened aperture will also prove helpful if the Defense Department, Space Command and Force, are to elevate their reach and influence and broker a wider international community of not just space-faring but like-minded space-vested nations with shared values and aspirations for space security. In this respect, it is concerning that the PRC has for some years now sponsored and led an Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization as a platform to further its geopolitical leadership in space (see e.g., Hrozensky 2016). Though Japan leads an alternative to this in the form of the Asia-Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum, a broad-based community of security practitioners can be a useful additional counterweight, providing persuasive influence that might be brought to bear at critical junctures of the future.

Getting to this widened outreach to partners need not require massive investments nor major deviations from current directions and emphases. All that is required is the inclusion of a complementary effort in partnership development focused on partner nations lacking space capabilities and emphasizing engagement with space-related sectors addressing security-related challenges beyond military applications. By and large, given the modest familiarity with space and space security in most partner nations, much of this engagement will be focused on awareness-raising and education, and the development of enduring and supportive professional connections and networks. Much of this work can probably be pursued through Defense academic institutes in the case of militaries from partner nations. Civilians and other uniformed services might pose challenges, given limitations on the authorities available for U.S. Defense organizations. But it should be recognized the Defense Department has additional assets to bring to bear on this issue, in the shape of its five Regional Centers that possess authorities to convene government officials across the security spectrum, uniformed or civilian, and in some limited instances, civil society. The Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, and William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, together are uniquely placed to support such soft-power initiatives. All have enjoyed successes in areas such as counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cyber, and maritime security, to name but a few, and have established long-standing networks of alumni to sustain enduring connections around the world. Given these capabilities, perhaps Space Command and Force might look into the potential of these Regional Centers in supporting their soft power efforts? More boldly, perhaps a center of roughly similar mission and scope, but under the umbrella of Space Command or Force and addressing space security and associated soft power priorities, might be countenanced?

At the end of the day, restricting ourselves to technology-oriented approaches only takes us partly to where we need to be in partnerships. We need a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to partnership development to widen the circle of potential partners and audiences. A soft power element can help, shaping patterns of values, beliefs, and preferences through appeal and attraction, and inspiring ideals others deem worthy of following, without coercion (see e.g., Nye 2004). Granted, in the broader U.S. soft power projection, there probably are other agencies better placed (and with the right authorities) to

engage in this manner. It is noteworthy, for example, that Space Force has recently concluded a memorandum of understanding with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to leverage NASA's civilian background and expertise in space diplomacy (see e.g. Erwin 2020). As welcome as this is, it does not mean we should remain content handicapping ourselves through self-imposed constraints in partnership development. We can, and should, do more, engaging with wider circles of nations and reaching audiences beyond militaries with narratives and ideals that resonate.

A recent conversation with a typical security practitioner from a non space-faring developing nation brought home the nature of the challenge and the opportunity now often foregone in our partnership engagement. When asked what he thought about space security and engagement with the U.S. in this arena, he replied: "You know, for us, space security is something like watching you guys play ice-hockey. Interesting, and sometimes we even tune in to watch. But we don't actually play, and tend not to get terribly excited about it." Building on this sporting analogy, how might we make space security something more relevant and appealing to a wider community of nations, such that they feel to be "players" too? Might we make space security more like soccer (or football as it is more properly known) in these nations, which energizes and animates, capturing hopes and dreams, and inspires not only national commitment and cooperation, but regional and international? Or will we remain content to play ice-hockey, ceding to others the chance to build influence and shape the norms and rules of the future? The ball (or puck) is with us.

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