



An International Environmental Agreement for space debris mitigation among asymmetric nations[☆]

Michael J. Singer^{*}, John T. Musacchio

Technology and Information Management Department, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1156 High Street, SOE 3, Santa Cruz, CA 95064-1077, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 February 2010

Received in revised form

3 August 2010

Accepted 17 August 2010

Available online 1 September 2010

Keywords:

Space debris

Mitigation

Deorbiting

International Environmental Agreement

(IEA)

Economics

ABSTRACT

We investigate how ideas from the International Environmental Agreement (IEA) literature can be applied to the problem of space debris mitigation. Space debris pollution is similar to other international environmental problems in that there is a potential for a “tragedy of the commons” effect: individual nations bear all the cost of their mitigation measures but share only a fraction of the benefit. As a consequence, nations have a tendency to underinvest in mitigation. Coalitions of nations, brought together by IEAs, have the potential to lessen the tragedy of the commons effect by pooling the costs and benefits of mitigation. This work brings together two recent modeling advances: (i) a game theoretic model for studying the potential gains from IEA cooperation between nations with asymmetric costs and benefits, (ii) an orbital debris model that gives the societal cost that specific actions, such as failing to deorbit an inactive spacecraft, have on the environment. We combine these two models with empirical launch-share data for a “proof of concept” of an IEA for a single mitigation measure—deorbiting spacecraft at the end of operational lifetime. Simulations of empirically derived and theoretical launch distributions among nations suggest the possibility that voluntary coalitions can provide significant deorbiting gains relative to nations acting in the absence of an IEA agreement.

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1. Problem statement

When actions of individuals affect a shared resource, there is potential for a tragedy of the commons consequence: individual decision-makers under-invest in protection if they see only a fraction of the benefits from the investment. Consequently, a stream of recent literature has sought to understand how nations can form coalitions to counter the potential for tragedy of the commons effects in protecting the environment.

Game-theoretic models in the greenhouse gas (GHG), ozone depletion, and acid rain arenas have shown that when nations (1) recognize asymmetries of marginal costs and benefits of mitigation and (2) establish coalitions that adjust

abatement rates through transfer payments, there can be a substantial increase in global levels of pollution abatement. The size of the increase is a function of the number of parties, the nature of the transfer scheme, and the size and nature of the asymmetries. (See, for example, [1–4].)

Our initial focus applies the International Environmental Agreement (IEA) framework to one debris mitigation measure: post-mission deorbiting of spacecraft. We derive marginal benefits from the lifetime-risk metric provided by Bradley and Wein [5], marginal costs from deorbit cost estimates given by Wiedemann [6], and spacecraft ownership data from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) database [7].

2. Background

2.1. Economics of debris mitigation

Wiedemann et al. [6] estimate global debris damage and mitigation costs for the coming 100 years under

[☆] This paper was presented during the 60th IAC in Daejeon.

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 831 425 2024.

E-mail addresses: mjsinger@soe.ucsc.edu (M.J. Singer), johnm@soe.ucsc.edu (J.T. Musacchio).

various implementation schedules of debris mitigation guidelines, including deorbiting. Janovsky [8] estimates deorbit costs for various spacecraft configurations and orbits. Shah et al. [9] use game-theoretic cooperation archetypes and system dynamics modeling to explore a “partial cooperation” strategy between two nations for sharing tracking data in view of spacecraft and sensor economics and national security concerns.

To assess the benefit of debris mitigation strategies, Bradley and Wein [5] propose a new metric of “lifetime risk”, which they define as the risk of catastrophic destruction posed to an operational spacecraft launched t years from present under a particular scenario of launch and mitigation assumptions. They propose the maximum of this lifetime risk over all future time as a metric of “...sustainability (loosely defined as the highest utility that can be maintained for all future time), which has gained some popularity as an alternative to economic efficiency [10, Chapter 4], particularly for studying resources that—like outer space—have no substitutes and are in the infancy of their exploitation.” [5] They also use lifetime risk to compute the difference in cumulative operational spacecraft destroyed through time T for compliance and non-compliance with deorbit guidelines, and term the asymptote of this value, “damage”.

Bradley and Wein identify various instruments used in environmental economics to achieve the target pollution level including “technology controls, ceilings or taxes on emissions, subsidies for pollution reduction, tradeable emissions permits, and non-compliance fees.” They use the damage metric described above to generate a fee schedule for failure to deorbit future launched objects, legacy costs for consequences of past launches, and debris from anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) tests. The current work extends that of Bradley and Wein using a game-theoretic IEA framework with abatement trading which is analogous to emissions permit trading in the GHG realm.

2.2. IEA model framework

Game theory is a mathematical method used to study interactions between actors based on behavioral assumptions about their preferences. Given those assumptions, various equilibrium concepts can be applied to obtain predictions about the outcomes of the actors’ strategic interactions. Game-theoretic methods are ideally suited to formally modeling strategic considerations when actions have consequences for a globally shared environmental resource [11].

“Cooperative” game theory studies interactions between parties in situations where binding agreements can be enforced by a third party. However, when there is no third party to enforce cooperation, as is typically the case for International Environmental Agreements, such agreements must be designed to be self-enforcing. “For IEAs to improve management of shared environmental resources, they must make it attractive for countries to sign and carry out the terms of the agreement” [12]. The theory assumes parties act in their own self-interest to maximize their individual net profit (share of benefit from global

abatement minus individual cost of environmental abatement). Self-enforcing agreements maintained only by parties acting in their own self-interest are studied in “non-cooperative” game theory. Seminal works in the modeling of such self-enforcing IEAs include the “benchmark” model introduced by Barrett [12], Hoel [13], and Carraro and Siniscalco [14].

In game-theoretic framing, each actor independently attempts to find a “best response” to other actors’ strategies. If there is a mutual best response where no actor can benefit by individually deviating from that solution, the game solution is a “Nash-equilibrium” [15].

The Nash equilibrium solutions of IEA games usually involve coalitions of only a subset of the parties. If for all parties the mutually best action is to not enter a coalition, then the “null coalition” is an equilibrium outcome. If some actors determine their mutual best response is to join, while others determine their mutual best response is to refrain from joining, the result is a “partial” coalition.

These “null” and “partial” Nash equilibria are usually inefficient in that they fail to maximize global profit (i.e., profit summed over all actors). In contrast, complete membership in a “full” coalition yields an efficient or socially optimal outcome that maximizes global profit. The full coalition outcome, however, usually requires a “social hegemon” or legal framework decreeing abatement levels for each actor.

IEA research has focused on evaluating levels of abatement and profit for self-enforcing partial coalitions relative to the null coalition and full coalition under different assumptions of actor characteristics and rules of coalition formation.

For a coalition to be stable (i.e., self-enforcing), two criteria introduced in the cartel formation game of d’Aspremont et al. [16] must be satisfied:

1. Coalition members individually realize a greater profit under the agreement than they would outside (a condition termed as “internal” stability in economic oligopoly literature).
2. Non-members individually realize a greater profit outside the coalition than they would inside (“external” stability).

Early research [12] indicated that a partial coalition formed by identical nations (i.e., each nation having identical cost functions and benefit functions for abatement) could neither attain significant membership (no more than three members, depending on the shape of the marginal benefit and cost functions) nor improve significantly upon the null coalition level of global abatement. Later research by Barrett [17,1] indicated potentially greater membership and benefits for self-enforcing coalitions relative to null coalition outcome when there are marginal cost and benefit asymmetries between actors (nations) and side payments to trade abatement responsibilities. A further challenge for IEAs has been finding mechanisms to overcome incentives for nations to “free-ride” on the abatement efforts of others [18].

These insights have been significantly extended and refined in non-cooperative game theoretic analyses including McGinty [19,3], Pintassilgo [20], Carraro [2], Weikard [4], and Fuentes-Albero and Rubio [21].

2.3. IEA model

We adopt the non-cooperative game framework referenced above to investigate abatement gains of self-enforcing partial coalitions in contrast with null-coalition and full-coalition behavior.

The global profit function is defined as

$$\Pi = \sum \pi_i \quad \text{where } \pi_i = B_i(Q) - C_i(q_i). \quad (1)$$

Each nation bears the cost, C_i , of its own abatement, q_i , while all nations share the benefits of reduction of harm, B_i , from global abatement Q .

In a stable partial coalition, members have a collective profit that is at least as high as the sum of their individual profits operating alone. However, the allocation of abatement levels within the coalition that maximizes the coalition profit might not result in a higher individual profit for each member compared to their profit if they left the coalition.

To overcome this problem, a transfer payment scheme redistributes the net burden among members. The “burden-sharing” rule ensures that the profit each nation receives as a coalition member exceeds what they receive outside the coalition. Nations that abate an amount greater than required under the agreement would receive a positive transfer, while nations that purchase permits are able to meet their abatement responsibilities under the agreement at a lower cost. Net transfers are zero-sum.

Weikard [4] presents a family of sharing rules that satisfy the internal and external stability requirements cited above. We adopt one rule from this set: the allocation rule for abatement requirements under a system of tradable pollution permits followed by McGinty [3]. This rule proposes transfers between coalition members that are “just sufficient to quell any incentive to deviate from the agreement” and distributes the remaining coalition surplus in proportion to the members’ benefit share-to-cost ratio.

3. Application of IEA model to debris mitigation

For this initial model of an IEA for space debris mitigation, we examine the effect of a self-enforcing market mechanism on parties’ choices regarding a single type of abatement action: deorbiting of spacecraft after mission lifetime. We do not consider other actions parties might take that would affect the rate of debris generation such as active removal of debris, collision avoidance, or anti-satellite weaponry.

3.1. Elements of the model

An IEA model requires the following elements:

- An environmental resource and a pollutant.
- Actors and actions that affect the environmental resource.

- An estimate of harm to the environmental resource from pollutant generation and benefits to actors for their own and others’ abatement of harm.
- An estimate of costs to each actor for abating harm.

We specify the elements as follows for a space debris mitigation IEA:

3.1.1. Environmental resource and pollutant

The environmental resource is taken to be the 900–1000 km altitude shell-of-interest (SOI) analyzed by Bradley and Wein [5]. This is the region of near-Earth space with the highest object density. (The 700–900-km shell has a higher density of operational spacecraft but lower overall object density.) The “pollutant” is the population of orbital objects, which have potential for catastrophic collision with spacecraft or debris. Of particular concern is the future introduction of spacecraft that are launched but not deorbited after completion of their operational lifetimes.

3.1.2. Actors and actions

Since our analysis relies on the long-term debris evolution model of Bradley and Wein, we adopt their baseline assumption of a total annual launch rate of three operational spacecraft per year to the 900–1000-km SOI [5].

For a set of actors, we look at ownership data, by nation, for recent low Earth orbit (LEO) spacecraft whose orbits enter this SOI as indicated in the UCS database of operational spacecraft [7]. We use a recent eight-year period¹ and ignore spacecraft in “elliptical” orbits because these spend less than 1% of the time in the SOI. (See Appendix.)

We focus only on the pattern of launch distribution among nations (as “owners”), and ignore temporal variation in the ownership set. The one spacecraft identified as “international” we treat as having a single owner, and the one spacecraft with two identified co-owners we allocate equally between them. The resulting set contains seven actors, and we scale the launch distribution to match the total launch rate above.

Reliance on the historical launch rates to the SOI results in a small set of actors, while the trend is arguably toward broader participation. Given this, we consider the seven-actor empirical distribution to be our Case I, and construct a “plausible” distribution for a larger set of actors, which we call Case II. We construct this pattern from UCS data for a broader LEO shell, from 700 to 1000 km. There were 15 single-nation “owners” of spacecraft recently launched to this shell.² Of these nations, nine launched only one spacecraft. As benefit and cost in our model are both functions only of the parties’ launch rates, this launch distribution would yield a subset of nine identical actors out of the 15. To incorporate some measure of variety in this larger, hypothetical set of

¹ 7/1/01 to 7/1/09. Use of an eight-year launch period follows practice for long-term debris models [22,23].

² For tractability of assigning ownership interests, we exclude the seven multi-nation owner sets.

actors, we weight the distribution launches by orbit fraction in this larger shell. Figs. 1 and 2 show share of eight-year launch rates for Cases I and II, listed in order from highest (designated as #1) to lowest.

In Case III, we provide a preliminary sensitivity analysis of the relationship between coalition outcomes, number of nations, n , and the benefit and cost asymmetry by considering launch patterns based on the zeta distribution with a range of “steepness” parameters s (explained below).

3.1.3. Harm

Bradley and Wein [5], in the exposition of their debris environment model, introduce several important performance metrics relevant to environmental risk assessment. The model, a mean-field approximation set of ordinary differential equations, computes rates of change of spacecraft, rocket bodies, and fragments in a SOI for $T \in [0, \infty)$, where 0 is the present. The model categorizes spacecraft as operational or no longer operational, with or without

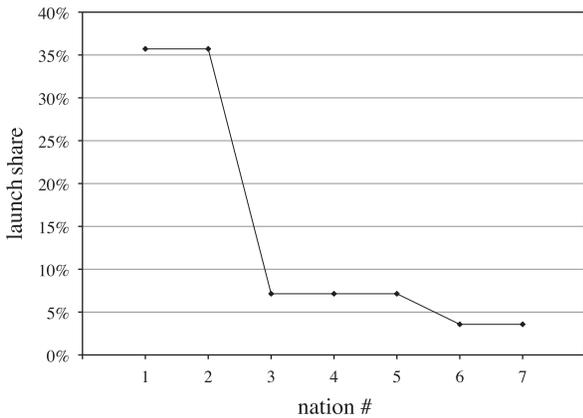


Fig. 1. Projected launch rate to the shell of interest (SOI) for our proxy Case I of seven spacecraft-owning nations, sorted high to low (derived from the UCS database).

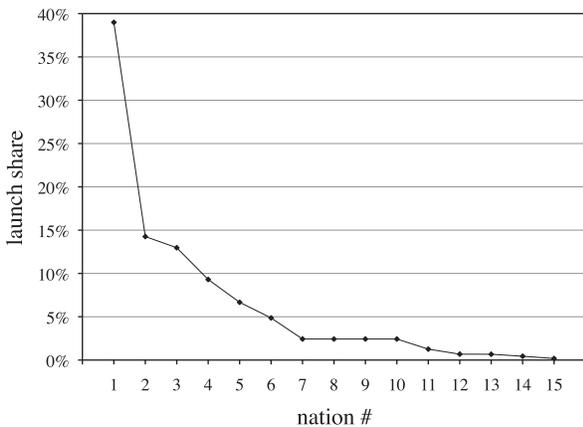


Fig. 2. Projected launch rate to the shell of interest (SOI) for our proxy Case II of 15 spacecraft-owning nations, sorted high to low (derived from ownership of spacecraft launched to the broader 700–1000 km altitude shell, per the UCS database).

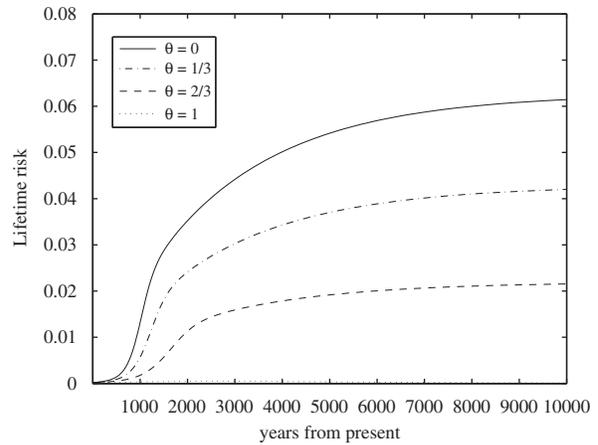


Fig. 3. Risk to a spacecraft of catastrophic destruction during its operational lifetime as a function of deorbit compliance rate.

deorbit capability; rocket bodies with or without deorbit capability; and fragments as hazardous or benign in collision with other objects depending on collision velocity and fragment characteristics. Parameters for the differential equations are expectations over the same distributions that govern an object-by-object simulation.

The model’s primary metric is “lifetime risk”, which Bradley and Wein define as “the probability that a spacecraft launched at time t will be destroyed (via an intact–intact or catastrophic intact–fragment collision) while it is still operational” (p. 1376). Fig. 3 shows lifetime risk for an operational spacecraft launched at time t in the SOI given a baseline set of parameters (launch rates, existing debris flux, spacecraft characteristics, fraction of spacecraft deorbited, etc.). Risk increases at a modest rate for the next several hundred years, increases rapidly starting at about year 1000, then levels off ca. 3000 years.³

The time frame explored in Bradley and Wein’s paper and herein (e.g., 10000 years in Fig. 3) is substantially longer than that explored by most debris evolution models. (Object-by-object evolution models generate predictions for periods extending up to 200 years [24,26].) The extended time horizon is necessary to provide a “debris footprint” or quantification of the full consequence (or lack thereof) of a mitigation measure.

From the lifetime-risk metric, Bradley and Wein derive a second metric, “sustainable lifetime risk” defined as the maximum of the lifetime risk over all future times. Fig. 4 shows how the lifetime risk at 200 years (dashed line) and the sustainable lifetime risk (solid curve) vary as a function of deorbit compliance rate. The former value is relatively insensitive and the latter strongly sensitive to deorbit compliance.

From the lifetime-risk metric, Bradley and Wein also derive the measure of harm most directly relevant to our

³ See Bradley and Wein [5, pp. 1375–1376] for discussion of qualitative agreement of model results at 200 years with those reported by Liou and Johnson for LEGEND [24]; pp. 1374–1375 for long-term behavior; pp. 1380–1381 for difference in bounds on the number of fragments relative to Kessler [25].

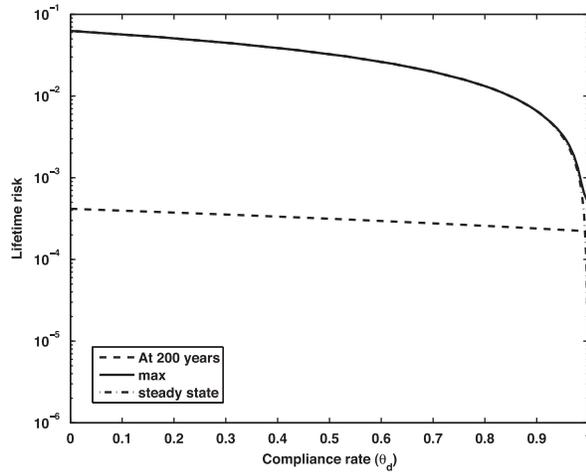


Fig. 4. Sustainable lifetime risk (solid curve) and lifetime risk at 200 years (dashed line) to an operational spacecraft as a function of fraction of launched spacecraft that are deorbited at the end of operational life. ([5], Fig. 5, reprinted with permission).

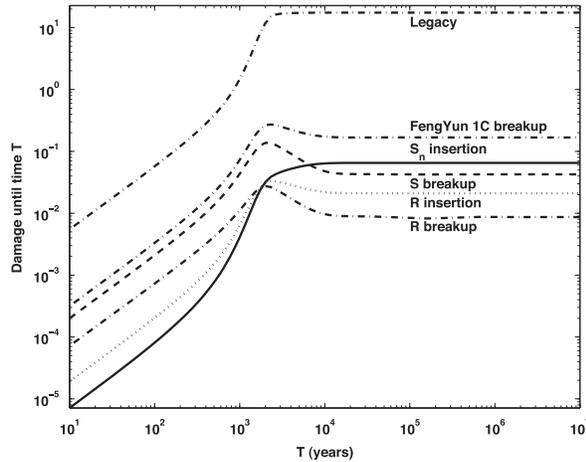


Fig. 5. Operational spacecraft destroyed, relative to baseline, up until time T by launch at $T=0$ of an additional spacecraft or rocket body without deorbit capability; a breakup at $T=0$; damage expected from current spacecraft and debris, and legacy damage due to the most recent anti-satellite weapon test. Of key interest here is the “ S_n insertion” curve representing harm caused by failure to deorbit a spacecraft. All curves shown assume a 2/3 deorbit compliance rate ([5], Fig. 6, reprinted with permission).

current purposes, the additional operational spacecraft destroyed up until time T by a failure to deorbit one “extra” spacecraft (i.e., a launch that represents a perturbation above a given launch rate), shown as “ S_n insertion” in Fig. 5.⁴

An interesting feature of the figure is that actions representing break-ups at $T=0$ show the largest peak difference relative to baseline, since the effects of that

⁴ The subscript “ n ” signifies an addition to the non-operational spacecraft population, i.e., a spacecraft not deorbited after operational lifetime.

early breakup cause risk to rise sooner and more rapidly, and dissipate sooner. Launch of a spacecraft or rocket body without deorbiting capability does not represent a current break-up but, instead, has an attendant risk of break-up at some future epoch. These curves, “ R insertion” and “ S_n insertion” show, respectively, a smaller peak and no significant peak in operational spacecraft destroyed relative to baseline. The figure also shows operational spacecraft expected to be destroyed due to currently orbiting spacecraft and debris, and the future harm expected from the most recent anti-satellite weapon test.

3.1.4. Benefit from abatement of harm

We derive benefit from abatement of harm attributable to the deorbit of one spacecraft from Bradley and Wein’s third metric provided by the “ S_n insertion” of Fig. 5. Until one reaches a very high level of compliance ($>94\%$), the marginal benefit of deorbiting has a relatively low dependence on the rate of deorbit compliance. We therefore assume a linear benefit function with constant marginal benefits of deorbiting.

As a first approximation, the net present value (NPV) of the incremental benefit from avoiding spacecraft destroyed, relative to baseline, is a function of discount rate:

$$NPV_{\text{benefit}} = \frac{1}{2} \text{cost of harm per spacecraft destroyed} \times \int_0^\infty e^{-rt} \left[\frac{d(\text{spacecraft destroyed})}{dt} \right] dt.$$

The factor of $\frac{1}{2}$ reflects an assumption that, on average, those spacecraft that are destroyed will have survived that portion of their lifetime [6].

Models in the GHG arena typically compute future harm for a period of 100 years and adopt discount rates on the order of 2% [27]. Some GHG models explore periods of up to 400 years and employ various declining discount rate formulations [28–30].

For the present analysis, we limit consideration of harm to spacecraft replacement cost, which we take to be \$200M. We compute the NPV of benefit using the Weitzman “step” discount formulation with a 4% near-term discount rate, stepping down to 0.1% for the period beyond 300 years. This yields an NPV which we round to \$1M and assign to the benefit parameter b in the benefit function. The resulting benefit function for actor i is

$$B_i(Q) = b\alpha_i Q.$$

We allocate abatement benefits to nations in accordance with their exposure in the SOI through the parameter α_i , which represents their share of launches (Figs. 1 and 2).

A full accounting of the NPV of harm, here represented by the benefit parameter, b , should arguably account for costs beyond the replacement value of spacecraft destroyed, e.g., earning capability of commercial spacecraft; social, environmental, and national security costs; harm to human spacefarers; and disruption or degradation of operations due to damage from debris or performance of

additional collision avoidance. Conversely, most discount schemes considered in the environmental economics literature cited above would reduce the NPV of harm. Such changes might also lead to a more complex benefit function with nonlinear marginal benefits.

3.1.5. Abatement costs

Actual deorbiting costs vary as a function of orbit, mass, and other variables, in particular whether a spacecraft's mission already requires it to have maneuvering capabilities [8]. Such a spacecraft would typically have a lower additional cost to add deorbit capabilities than a spacecraft not already carrying fuel and thrusters for its mission.

Given the paucity of data regarding mission plans and spacecraft designs individually or in the aggregate by actor, we suppose that a nation's marginal costs for deorbiting spacecraft are uniformly distributed between \$0 and \$1M, for an average cost of \$0.5M.⁵

We assume (i) each nation chooses to add deorbit capability to those spacecraft for which addition is least costly and (ii) the marginal cost of deorbiting increases linearly with the fraction of spacecraft a nation deorbits. That is, the cost function for each nation i deorbiting a quantity q_i of spacecraft is

$$C_i(q_i) = \frac{c_i q_i^2}{2}.$$

Given a maximum deorbiting cost of $c = \$1M$, the cost coefficient for nation i is $c_i = c/n_i$; the marginal cost is $c q_i/n_i$; and total cost for nation i is $c q_i^2/2n_i$. Deorbiting all n_i of their spacecraft launched per year would cost a nation $\$0.5M \times n_i$.

Technology improvements, e.g., in use of solar sails for propulsion [31], offer the possibility of substantial reductions in cost of deorbiting. Fuller consideration of expected technology developments and choices by actors might also warrant a more complex cost function.

3.2. Simulation

The simulation computes global and individual abatement and profit for the null and full coalition (social optimum) outcomes. It also computes, for each partial coalition chosen from the power set of all possible coalitions:

- Profit and abatement by members.
- Profit by members if they were to leave the coalition.

The simulator then checks stability of each partial coalition. For each stable partial coalition, the simulator computes:

- Transfer payments among members (and member profits after transfer).
- Profit and abatement by non-members.

Finally, for each scenario with a stable partial coalition, the simulator computes global (total summed over members and non-members) abatement Q and profit Π and identifies those partial coalitions that generate the highest global abatement (which we deem the “best partial coalition”) and highest global profit. (If there is more than one “best partial coalition”, we select one to represent the class in the figures.)

4. Results

4.1. Case I

In the simulation of our seven-actor Case I with parameterization as above,⁶ there are 30 stable coalitions out of $2^7 = 128$ possible coalitions. Three coalitions, each with four members, tie for generation of the highest global abatement. These coalitions consist of the two highest launch rate nations and any two of the three mid-level nations: $\{1,2,3,4\}, \{1,2,3,5\}, \{1,2,4,5\}$.

Fig. 6 shows global abatement (deorbits/year) for the null, best partial, and full coalition cases. Typically, the full coalition level of abatement can be achieved only if actors can be compelled to do what is socially optimal. The best partial coalitions for our Case I make up 65% of the difference between the null and full coalition levels of abatement.

Fig. 7 shows global profit (\$M/year) for the null, best partial, and full coalition cases. The best partial coalitions make up 73% of the difference in total payoffs between the null and full coalitions. While there are parameter settings for which this is not the case, here the partial coalitions that achieve the highest global abatement are the same as those that achieve the highest global profit. There are no higher-membership stable partial coalitions than those which achieve the highest abatement and profit.

Fig. 8 shows profit achieved by each nation in the null and best partial coalition cases. Each member nation individually achieves a higher profit in the best partial coalitions than they would in the null coalition case. This confirms that membership in the coalition is consistent with parties' self-interest.

Fig. 9 shows abatement performed vs. abatement “responsibility” for each nation in the best partial coalition case. The difference between these two quantities is the number of “permits” the member sells (or buys) within the coalition. In this case, nations 1 and 2, which have equally high exposure to debris risk—and therefore gain the most from debris abatement—pay the other two coalition members to increase abatement from the levels they would execute according to their individual cost-benefit analyses.

Fig. 10 shows abatement responsibility (after transfer payments) nation-by-nation for the null and best partial coalition cases. This figure shows that the parties with the highest exposure in the SOI dramatically increase their

⁵ This is the value Bradley and Wein extrapolate (p. 1378) from Wiedemann et al. [6] for the cost of deorbiting an “average” spacecraft (800 kg) from their shell-of-interest (900–1000 km).

⁶ $b = \$1M$, $\{z_i\}$ from Figs. 1 and 2, $c_i = \$1M/n_i$.

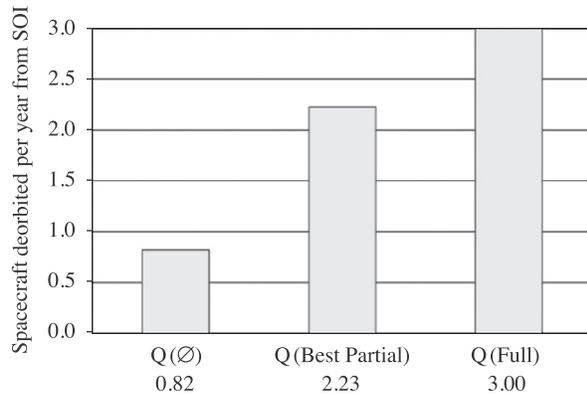


Fig. 6. Global abatement for null, best partial, and full coalitions for Case I.

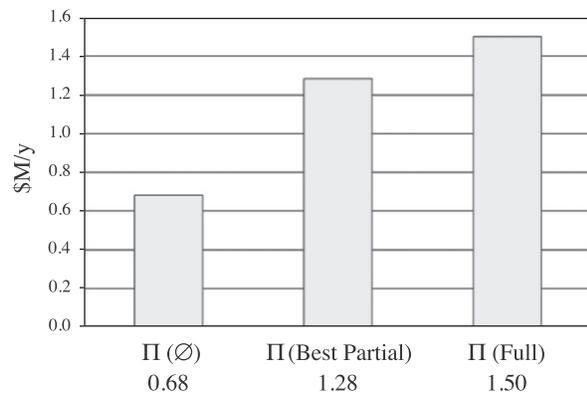


Fig. 7. Global profit for null, best partial, and full coalitions for Case I.

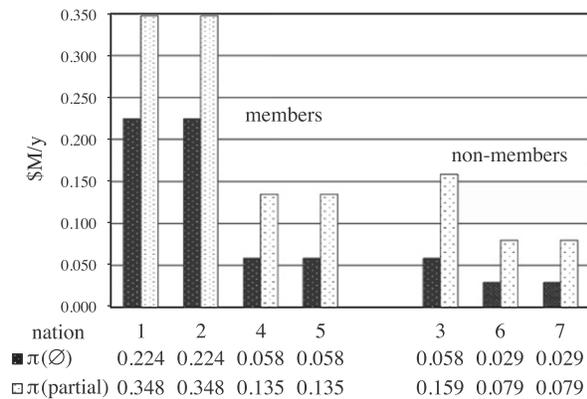


Fig. 8. Profit for null and best partial coalitions for Case I. Coalition members are displayed on the left and non-members on the right.

abatement over their null coalition levels, while still achieving the higher profit shown in Fig. 8.

4.2. Case II

In the simulation of our 15-nation Case II, there are 448 stable coalitions out of the $2^{15}=32768$ possible

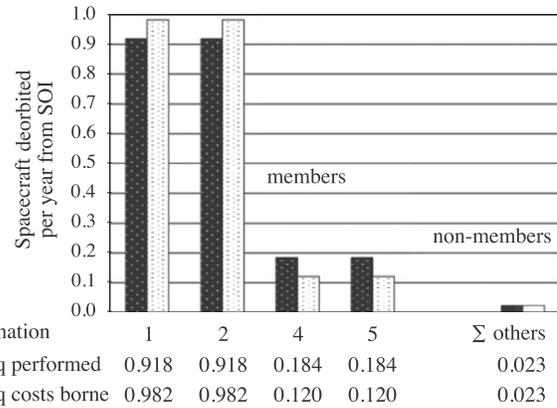


Fig. 9. Abatement effected vs abatement costs borne for best partial coalition for Case I. Coalition members are displayed on the left, with one summary entry for non-members on the right.

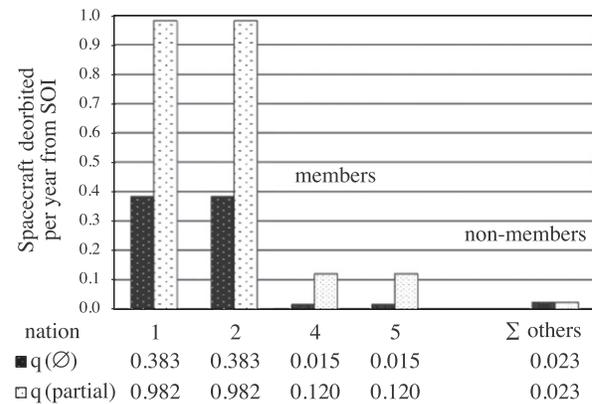


Fig. 10. Quantity of abatement: null vs best partial coalition for Case I. Coalition members are displayed on the left, with one summary entry for non-members on the right.

coalitions. The best partial coalitions are those consisting of the three highest launch rate countries, one of the four symmetric mid-rate nations, and nation #12 out of our set of 15: {1, 2, 3, 7, 12}, {1, 2, 3, 8, 12}, {1, 2, 3, 9, 12}, {1, 2, 3, 10, 12}.

Fig. 11 shows global abatement (deorbites/year) for the null, best partial, and full coalition cases. The best partial coalitions for our Case II achieve 37% of the difference between null and full coalition abatement and 48% of the difference between null and full coalition profit. As for Case I, the partial coalitions that achieve the highest global profit are the same as those that achieve the highest global abatement. In contrast with Case I, larger stable coalitions can form (up through 10 actors). However, abatement and profit for these coalitions are substantially lower than that for the best partial coalitions.

Fig. 12 shows abatement nation-by-nation for the null and best partial coalition cases. Again, in the presence of the coalition mechanism, members effect substantially higher abatement while achieving at least as high a profit as they would in the absence of the coalition.

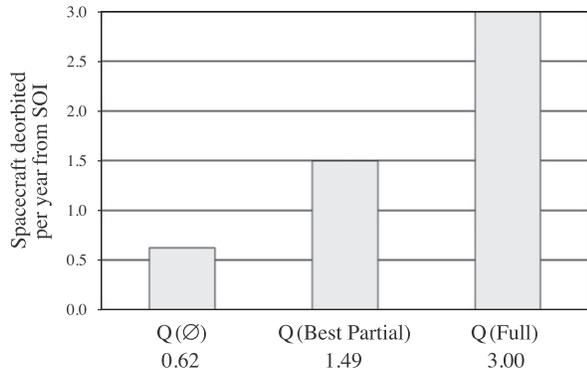


Fig. 11. Global abatement for null, best partial, and full coalitions for Case II.

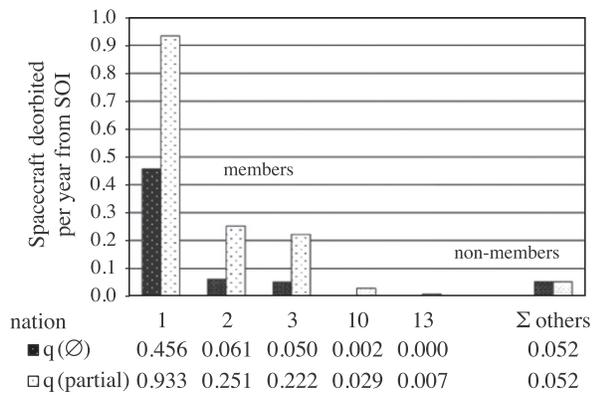


Fig. 12. Quantity of abatement: null vs best partial coalition for Case II. Coalition members are displayed on the left, with one summary entry for non-members on the right.

4.3. Case III

To systematically explore the effects of asymmetry and number of actors on coalition performance, we use for Case III an analytic distribution which approximates the 15-nation Case II launch distribution we derived from the UCS database for the 700–1000 km shell in LEO.

This curve roughly follows a power law, a type of distribution often seen in, e.g., the allocation of wealth across a population. In economics, this is modeled as a Pareto distribution. The zeta distribution is a discretized version of the Pareto distribution, with density function

$$f_s(k) = k^{-s} / \zeta(s),$$

where $\zeta(s)$ is the Riemann zeta function

$$\zeta(s) = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} 1/n^s, \quad s > 0, \quad s \neq 1.$$

The k parameter of the zeta distribution takes integer values which we use to represent the ordinal number for each actor. As the zeta distribution is defined for an infinite population, we truncate to 15 actors and normalize the sum to unity. Increasing values of s steepen the distribution among actors relative to a symmetric

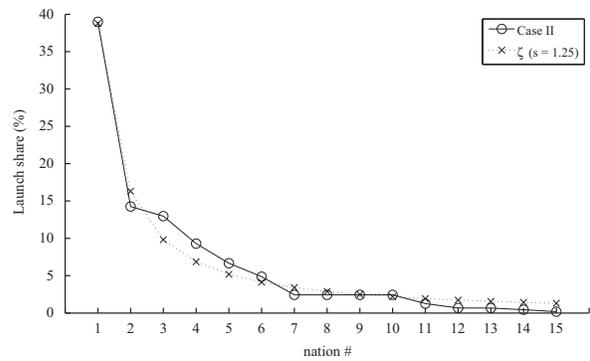


Fig. 13. Comparison of Case II launch shares with values based on zeta distribution for $s=1.25$. (Connecting lines are included for ease of viewing.)

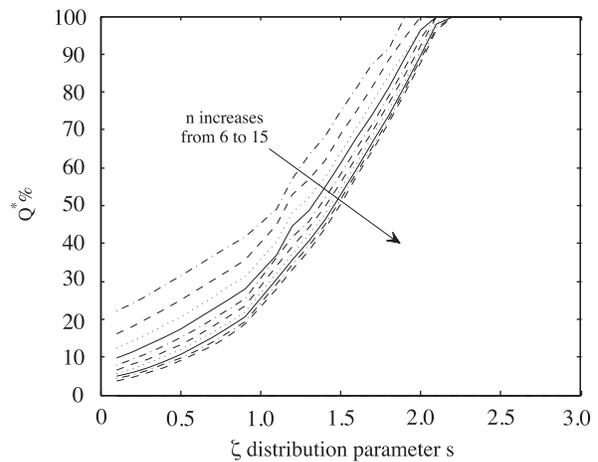


Fig. 14. Percentage abatement gain, $Q^*\%$, for the best partial coalition as a function of zeta distribution s parameter for various sizes, n , of actor sets.

distribution at $s=0$. Fig. 13 shows our Case II launch distribution fitted to a zeta distribution with a value of $s=1.25$, with a root mean square error of 0.0138.

Fig. 14 shows that % abatement gain— $Q^*\%$, computed as the percentage of difference between the null and full coalition abatement levels obtained by the best partial coalition—decreases as the number of actors in the distribution increases. For the value of s fitting Case II above, 1.25, $Q^*\%$ decreases from ca. 60% for 6 actors to 35% for 15 actors, consistent with findings of prior research [3,12].

Fig. 15 shows $Q^*\%$ levels obtained by the best partial coalition as a function of zeta distribution s parameter for 15 actors. $Q^*\%$ increases monotonically from ca. 1.5% to 100% at $s \approx 2.15$. The lowest $Q^*\%$ corresponds to the case of symmetric actors (where the zeta distribution becomes the uniform distribution at $s=0$). For the steepest distributions ($s \geq 2.15$), representing the greatest asymmetry in launch rates to the SOI, the best partial coalition is equivalent to the full coalition. This comports with McGinty’s observation that “increasing the variance of the

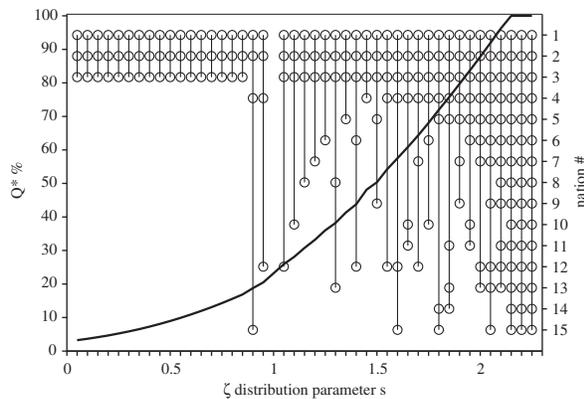


Fig. 15. Percentage abatement gain for the best partial coalition as a function of zeta distribution s parameter for 15 actors. Each vertical set of circles shows coalition membership, with key along the right vertical axis, with nations numbered in decreasing order of launch rate. Asymmetry increases as s increases. The zeta distribution is not defined for $s=1$.

[benefit share] and [cost coefficient] distributions increases both abatement and payoff gain” [3].

Fig. 15 also shows the change in best partial coalition membership, indicated as vertical sets of circles, for $s=\{0.05, 0.10, \dots, 2.25\}$. (No set appears for $s=1$ because the zeta distribution is not defined for that value.) The first derivative of abatement is discontinuous when membership shifts. For the symmetrical distribution ($s=0$), the best partial coalition consists of any two members. For all asymmetric zeta distributions, all best partial coalitions include the two highest launch rate actors. For $0 < s < 0.9$, the best partial coalition consists of the top three actors. At $s \approx 0.9$, a pattern emerges where lower ranked actors join the coalition, usually in addition to, but sometimes in lieu of the third highest launch rate actor.

5. Discussion

Abatement levels are higher with coalitions because the coordinating and burden-sharing mechanism of the IEA effectively multiplies the benefit each party obtains from the deorbits they perform and/or pay for.

Our profit function yields “% abatement gain”—percentage of difference between the null and full coalition abatement levels obtained by the best partial coalition—that is a function of launch distribution pattern among nations and is independent of the levels of b and c . Membership in the best-performing partial coalition is also independent of b and c .⁷

Two fundamental concerns about the % abatement gain the best partial coalition can achieve are (1) “free-riding” by non-members, and (2) the decrease in %

⁷ Our model of linear benefits and quadratic costs yields null, partial, and full coalition levels of abatement that are all directly proportional to the value of benefit parameter b , and inversely proportional to the cost parameter c .

abatement gain as the number of actors (here, the number of nations launching spacecraft to the SOI) increases.

In our linear benefits model, non-members do not reduce their abatement in the presence of the increased abatement by the coalition. As noted by McGinty [3], linear benefit functions result in orthogonal reaction functions for non-members, so IEA abatement does not influence non-member abatement (citing [17,32,13]).

For an IEA where benefits are effectively additive in the regime of interest, active free-riding—in the sense of a counter-productive decrease of non-members’ abatement that offsets an increase in members’ abatement—may not be a problem. However, free-riding through “undeserved” benefit spillovers enjoyed by non-coalition members may be some impediment to coalition formation. The extent to which non-members benefit from abatement generated by the coalition can be seen in Fig. 8.

The zeta-distribution analysis of the effect of the number of actors on Q^* achieved by the best partial coalitions is consistent with the results of Cases I and II. As per McGinty, “Allowing for asymmetry does not overturn the fundamental result that there is a trade-off between the gains to an IEA and the number of signatories.”

6. Conclusions and future work

This simulation was a successful proof of concept of an International Environmental Agreement for debris mitigation. The results suggest that a coordination mechanism allowing for transfer payments between self-interested parties can provide a means of increasing compliance with debris mitigation guidelines. However, it also confirmed the tradeoff between the gains to an IEA and the number of signatories.

In view of the heterogeneity of orbit selection and space debris density, the present work suggests that a promising route for debris mitigation might be development of a set of IEAs, each formulated for a modestly sized region of concern to a limited numbers of actors. Such IEAs, dealing with local concerns over non-uniformly dispersed pollutants, could achieve significantly higher Q^* than a single large IEA. This possibility stands in contrast to the GHG scenario, where the pollutant is rapidly dispersed through the environment, affecting a large number of nations.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Prof. Daniel Friedman, Dr. Hans-Peter Weikard, Prof. Matthew McGinty, and Mr. Andrew Bradley for their guidance and valuable inputs, with special thanks to the latter two for generously sharing code. This work was supported by the University Affiliated Research Center, a partnership between UC Santa Cruz and NASA Ames Research Center, under grant TO.084.MD.D.

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Appendix A. Spacecraft launched 7/1/01–7/1/09 with orbits crossing 700–1000 km [7]

Spacecraft	Nation	Orbit class	Perigee (km)	Apogee (km)	Launch date
PCSat	USA	LEO	790	801	09/30/01
Keyhole 4	USA	LEO	202	1041	10/05/01
Maroc Tubsat	Morocco–Germany	LEO	985	1014	12/10/01
Badr 2	Pakistan	LEO	985	1014	12/10/01
Envisat-1	ESA–Belgium	LEO	784	790	03/01/02
Spot 5	France–Belgium	LEO	816	818	05/04/02
Fengyun 1D	China (PR)–Brazil	LEO	851	871	05/15/02
Ofeq 5	Israel	LEO	367	764	05/28/02
Parus 93	Russia	LEO	949	1016	05/28/02
NOAA-17	USA	LEO	806	821	06/24/02
Alsat-1	Algeria	LEO	680	744	11/28/02
LatinSat B	Argentina	LEO	631	701	12/20/02
Coriolis	USA	LEO	391	846	01/06/03
Molniya-1T	Russia	Elliptical	623	40644	04/02/03
Parus 94	Russia	LEO	970	1014	06/04/03
Molniya 3-53	Russia	Elliptical	631	39788	06/19/03
MOST	Canada	LEO	831	855	06/30/03
MIMOSA	Czech Republic	LEO	316	845	06/30/03
Cubesat XI-IV	Japan	LEO	822	828	06/30/03
Cute-1	Japan	LEO	819	831	06/30/03
IRS-P6	India	LEO	802	875	10/17/03
DMSP 5D-3 F16	USA	LEO	843	852	10/18/03
CBERS 2	China (PR)–Brazil	LEO	773	774	10/21/03
Chuangxin 1	China (PR)–ESA	LEO	686	758	10/21/03
SERVIS-1	Japan	LEO	984	1015	10/30/03
Formosat-2	Taiwan–USA	LEO	725	743	05/21/04
LatinSat-C	Argentina	LEO	687	753	06/29/04
DEMETER	France	LEO	685	712	06/29/04
Unisat-3	Italy	LEO	700	779	06/29/04
Saudicomsat-1	Saudi Arabia	LEO	699	734	06/29/04
Saudicomsat-2	Saudi Arabia	LEO	699	764	06/29/04
Saudisat-2	Saudi Arabia	LEO	686	723	06/29/04
Amsat-Echo	USA	LEO	698	799	06/29/04
EOS-CHEM Aura	USA	LEO	702	703	07/15/04
Parus-95	Russia	LEO	951	1006	07/22/04
Double Star 2	China (PR)–ESA	Elliptical	272	38352	07/25/04
SDS III-4	USA	Elliptical	500	39850	08/31/04
Shiyan 2	China (PR)	LEO	694	711	11/18/04
PARASOL	France–USA	LEO	705	705	12/18/04
Parus-96	Russia	LEO	910	967	01/20/05
XSS-11	USA	LEO	800	800	04/11/05
Lacrosse/Onyx 5	USA	LEO	713	716	04/30/05
NOAA-18	USA	LEO	847	866	05/20/05
Keyhole 5	USA	LEO	264	1050	10/19/05
BeijinGalaxy-1	China (PR)	LEO	682	705	10/27/05
Sina-1	Iran	LEO	682	704	10/27/05
Cubesat XI-V	Japan	LEO	682	708	10/27/05
Topsat	United Kingdom	LEO	682	707	10/27/05
ALOS	Japan	LEO	697	700	01/24/06
Astro-F	Japan–Germany	LEO	707	716	02/21/06
COSMIC-A	Taiwan–USA–USA	LEO	800	800	04/15/06
COSMIC-B	Taiwan–USA–USA	LEO	800	800	04/15/06
COSMIC-C	Taiwan–USA–USA	LEO	800	800	04/15/06
COSMIC-D	Taiwan–USA–USA	LEO	800	800	04/15/06
COSMIC-E	Taiwan–USA–USA	LEO	800	800	04/15/06
COSMIC-F	Taiwan–USA	LEO	800	800	04/15/06
Calipso	France–USA	LEO	701	704	04/28/06
Cloudsat	USA	LEO	701	704	04/28/06
US-KS Oko 87	Russia	Elliptical	542	39807	07/21/06
Kompsat-2	South Korea	LEO	675	702	07/28/06
MetOp-A	Multinational	LEO	813	830	10/19/06
DMSP 5D-3 F17	USA	LEO	842	855	11/04/06
CoRoT	International	LEO	895	906	12/27/06
THEMIS 1	International	Elliptical	461	87304	02/17/07
THEMIS 2	International	Elliptical	458	87298	02/17/07
THEMIS 3	International	Elliptical	459	87054	02/17/07
THEMIS 4	International	Elliptical	467	87260	02/17/07
THEMIS 5	International	Elliptical	474	87526	02/17/07

Haiyang 1B	China (PR)–Brazil	LEO	783	813	04/11/07
SaudicomSat-3	Saudi Arabia	LEO	653	717	04/17/07
SaudicomSat-4	Saudi Arabia	LEO	650	750	04/17/07
SaudicomSat-5	Saudi Arabia	LEO	652	728	04/17/07
SaudicomSat-6	Saudi Arabia	LEO	649	761	04/17/07
SaudicomSat-7	Saudi Arabia	LEO	651	739	04/17/07
CAPE-1	USA	LEO	646	793	04/17/07
Tselina-2	Russia	LEO	850	880	06/29/07
Parus-97	Russia	LEO	956	999	09/11/07
CBERS 2B	China (PR)–Brazil	LEO	778	778	09/19/07
Globalstar MO66	USA	LEO	917	935	10/20/07
Globalstar MO67	USA	LEO	919	934	10/20/07
Globalstar MO68	USA	LEO	914	937	10/20/07
US-KS Oko 88	Russia	Elliptical	512	39849	10/23/07
SDS III-5	USA	Elliptical	400	39966	12/10/07
Radarsat-2	Canada	LEO	792	799	12/14/07
C/NOFS	USA	LEO	406	853	04/16/08
Fengyun 3A	China (PR)	LEO	825	829	05/27/08
Theos	Thailand	LEO	620	700	10/01/08
THEOS	Thailand	LEO	824	826	10/01/08
Chuangxin 2	China (PR)	LEO	786	805	11/05/08
Shiyan 3	China (PR)	LEO	788	803	11/05/08
US-KS Oko 89	Russia	Elliptical	667	39697	12/02/08
NOAA-19	USA	LEO	845	868	02/06/09
SPIRALE-A	France	Elliptical	608	35717	02/11/09
SPIRALE-B	France	Elliptical	627	35697	02/11/09
STSS ATRR	USA	LEO	867	879	05/05/09
Meridian-2	Russia	Elliptical	280	36471	05/20/09

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