

USING COMMERCIAL SOFTWARE TO ENHANCE COMMERCIAL SATELLITE ACQUISITION

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ABSTRACT: This paper documents the ways commercially available software from Analytical Graphics, Inc. (AGI) can improve the acquisition of remote sensing products by reducing the time and cost required to procure new imagery from remote sensing satellites. The method uses the industry-standard STK desktop software and software development kits and the new Standard Object Catalog (SOC) library of satellite platforms and sensor models.

AGI's STK and the STK Engine software development kit are commercial software packages with more than 22 years of history in the remote sensing market. The SOC is a new effort from AGI to create a community-driven library of spacecraft with accurate and thorough descriptions of mission capabilities. SOC entries can be searched and the data automatically loaded into STK for simulation and planning.

1. Commercial Remote Sensing Challenge – Everyone can benefit from remote sensing. As anyone who has used Google Earth, Bing Maps or Bhuvan can attest, seeing the Earth in high resolution from above provides a unique perspective that empowers decision-making and planning on scales never seen before in human history. However, getting new imagery is a complex job.

Satellite tasking (or requesting a satellite operator to take an image of a specific place) is a costly and time-consuming endeavor. Tasking for some satellites is free, while other satellites cost \$10,000 or more per image request. Furthermore, it may take days or weeks for a single satellite to pass over a target in such a way that its sensors can retrieve an image of a specific area (assuming there is no cloud cover during that pass).

For response to flooding, fires, storms or other disasters, this duration is often not acceptable. However, with commercial software tools outlined below, that process can be greatly improved by providing knowledge and choice to individuals.

2. Commercial Remote Sensing Industry – The satellite remote sensing industry has seen a dramatic change in the past 20 years. In 1991, there were only five nations that had access to satellite remote sensing assets: the United States, Japan, Russia, India and France.[1] Since then, the world has seen the impact of low-cost and micro-satellite

technology spread around the world with a current fleet of 62 satellites with optical payloads from more than 19 countries. [2]

Forty-seven of these platforms are civilian/commercial programs, and most of their data can be procured publicly. Figure 1 shows the growth of this market along with the distribution of countries contributing to it. With so many publicly available sources of data, resolutions varying from tens of meters to less than 1 meter; satellites with different agility (the ability to change orientation and point at a target); sensors with different swaths (the area on the Earth’s surface it can cover); payloads with different operating frequencies and satellite orbits with different revisit rates, it becomes challenging for someone who is not a rocket scientist to know which satellite is really best for getting an image quickly and affordably. Figure 2 shows this challenging problem in STK’s 3D environment populated with the active imaging satellites

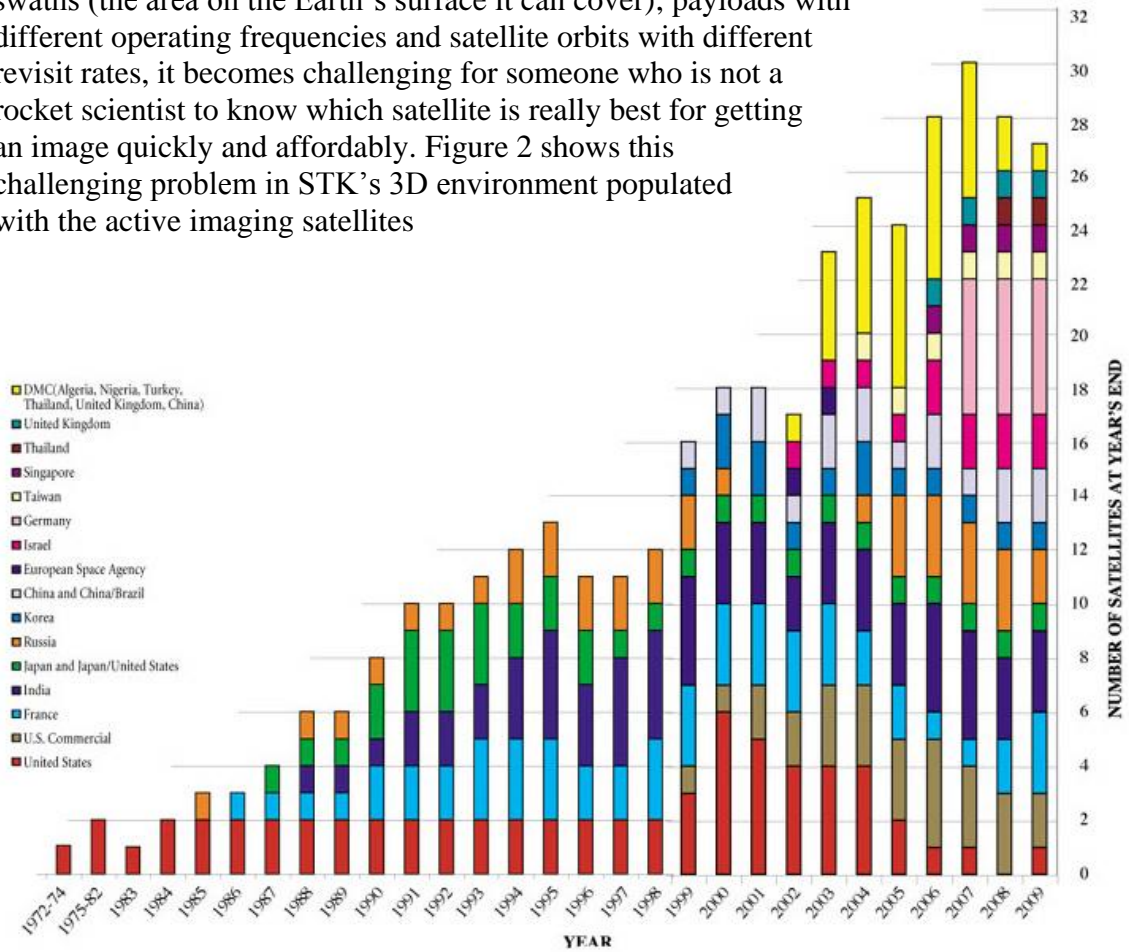


Figure 1: Number and distribution of commercial remote sensing satellites [1]

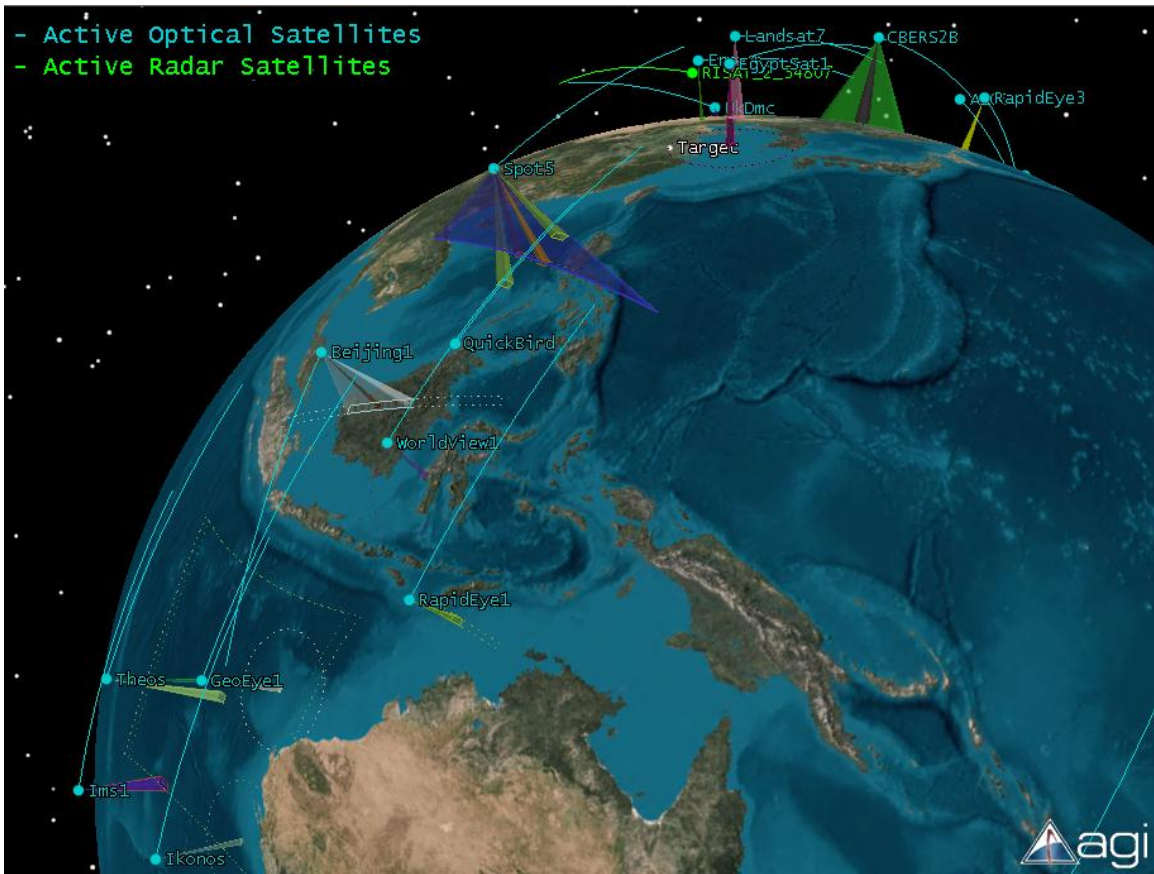


Figure 2: Screenshot from STK 3D environment using SOC satellite orbit and sensor data

4. Software modeling of remote sensing platforms – Fortunately for the global remote sensing community, AGI has been producing software with the ability to answer these difficult questions for the past 22 years. STK is a robust and highly accurate simulation software that predicts the location of satellites and performs time-based analysis on their orbits (such as the times when they will fly over a certain point on the globe). STK also includes an interface to the United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) database of satellite orbits using Two-Line Element (TLE) sets that allows the software to predict the locations of actual satellites in orbit. Additionally, STK includes the capability to model the sensor characteristics of satellite payloads and analyze their line of sight to targets on the ground.

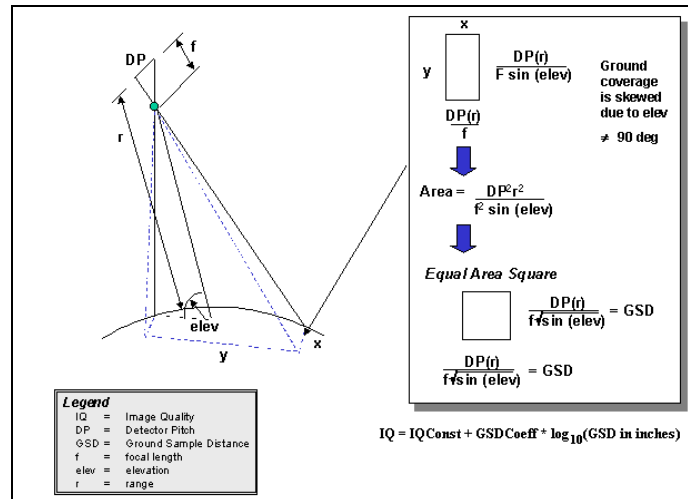


Figure 3: STK equations for modeling sensor resolution from STK desktop interactive help documentation

Recently, AGI embarked on a new initiative to make searching for this information easier for our community of 40,000 users. The company created a service called the Standard Object Catalog (SOC) that contains a library of accurate and thorough descriptions of satellite payloads. [3] The SOC also contains STK-formatted objects for use in image collection planning and other analysis tasks. The SOC data is available from a web portal at <http://soc.agi.com> as well as built in to the STK software through the AGI Data Federate (ADF), AGI's data management and collaboration software package. The ADF stores, manages and disseminates remote sensing assets in much the same way as a geographic information system (GIS) collects, stores and disseminates geography.

Together, STK and the SOC allow users to search for any set of active remote sensing satellites and accurately predict the times when any of these satellites' sensors will be able to acquire an image in question.

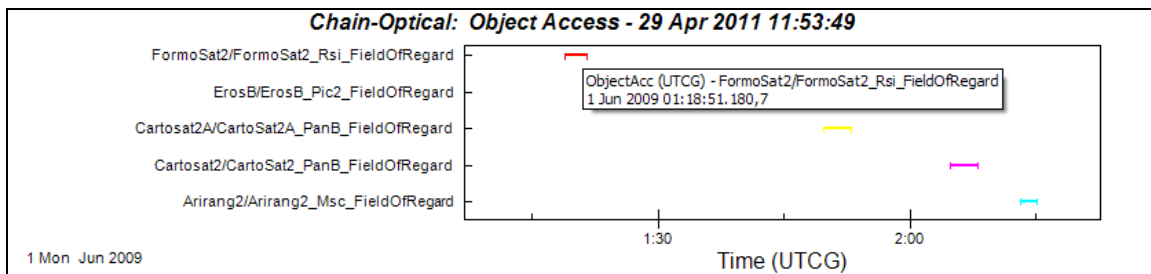


Figure 4: Graph from STK reporting overflight times of specific sensors

29 Apr 2011 11:55:31

Chain-Optical: Individual Strand Access

Target to ALOS/Alos_Avnir2_FieldOfRegard

	Start Time (UTCG)	Stop Time (UTCG)	Duration (sec)
	1 Jun 2009 02:56:45.020	1 Jun 2009 02:56:55.716	10.697
Min Duration	1 Jun 2009 02:56:45.020	1 Jun 2009 02:56:55.716	10.697
Max Duration	1 Jun 2009 02:56:45.020	1 Jun 2009 02:56:55.716	10.697
Mean Duration			10.697
Total Duration			10.697

Figure 5: Report from STK reporting overflight times of specific sensors

The screenshot shows the AGI Standard Object Catalog (SOC) web interface. The browser title is "AGI - Standard Object Catalog Beta - Windows Internet Explorer". The URL is "http://soc.agi.com/Default.aspx". The page header includes the "S.O.C. Beta Standard Object Catalog" logo and a login section with "Email:" and "Password:" fields and a "Log In" button. Below the header is a navigation bar with the "agi" logo and the word "THEOS".

On the left side, there is a search panel with tabs for "Satellites" and "Facilities". The search criteria are: Name (empty), Launch Year From (Any), To (Any), Mission Class (Earth Observation), Payload Type (Optical Imager), Status (Active), Country (Any), and Catalog Number (empty). There are "Search" and "Reset" buttons. Below the search panel is a list of 60 satellites, with "THEOS" selected and highlighted.

The main content area displays detailed information for the selected satellite, "THEOS". It includes a "Classification" section with fields for Common Name (THEOS), Long Name (Thailand Earth Observation System), Alternate Name (None), Status (Active), System (Thailand), and Country (Thailand). Below this is a table with columns "Mission", "Mission Class", and "Mission Type", containing one entry: Mission 1, Earth Observation, Ground Imaging. There are also sections for "Launch Information", "Mission Life", "Orbit Information", "Platform Information", and "Payloads". The "Payloads" section shows "1. Payload: Optical Imager" with details: Payload Type (Optical Imager (eo)), Payload Name (Panchromatic Camera), Payload Manufacturer (Not Recorded), Payload State of Health, Payload Long Name, and Payload Operations. There are also "Notes" and "Optical Payload Operations" sections.

Figure 5: AGI Standard Object Catalog (SOC) library of satellites and payloads

5. Remote sensing for the GIS customer – The integration of GIS into remote sensing systems is critical to meeting modern technological requirements, in that GIS is used by many industries including transportation, the environment, commerce and security. To best serve these industries, remote sensing systems need to tie directly into the authoritative content of GIS systems. AGI software meets that requirement by interoperating directly with GIS through modern geospatial standards. The features housed within the GIS can be used as input parameters to the remote sensing system, and the features’ geography and associated attributes can optimize collection and overall performance of the system.

6. Benefits of remote sensing prediction – With the combination of AGI’s commercial STK software and the content of the SOC, anyone can now determine which satellites will cover a target in the shortest amount of time and allows users to go to the right imagery provider for their request. Additionally, users can look back at historical satellite orbits to see which providers *could* have taken a particular image under particular conditions such as lighting, weather and image direction.

Moreover, AGI has used our software development kits to showcase the flexible nature of these capabilities in an online showcase: <http://spacedata.agi.com>. From the “Satellite Overflight Portal,” you can select a list of satellites, a target location and set of criteria (date, image direction, image elevation, etc), and the software will return a time-based list of satellites that meet those criteria.

Finally, AGI has built a proof-of-concept “Satellite Overflight Tool” to be used within the STK Desktop Software application. This utility rapidly searches the SOC database for remote sensing platforms that meet the collection criteria of the user. In this workflow, users select options such as preferred satellite operator, sensor type (SAR, panchromatic, multispectral, hyperspectral) , sensor resolution, and image elevation angle (nadir, oblique, etc). This example can be downloaded and from the AGI Developer Network (ADN): <http://adn.agi.com/detailedView.cfm?resourceId=505> and is available for use today. As a custom workflow, this could be modified to fit other user requirements such as identifying overflight opportunities that meet sun-angle (and shadow) constraints, weather data, as well as many other analyses offered in STK.

All of these analysis capabilities are available from AGI desktop products, AGI software development kits or even embedded tools in products like ArcGIS through AGI’s STK Server product line.

The true benefits of these capabilities are realized when a user combines the analytical power of STK software with weather data, digital terrain data sets, geospatial databases, large lists of targets and robust scheduling algorithms to optimize the collection of assets based on resolution, priority and cost.

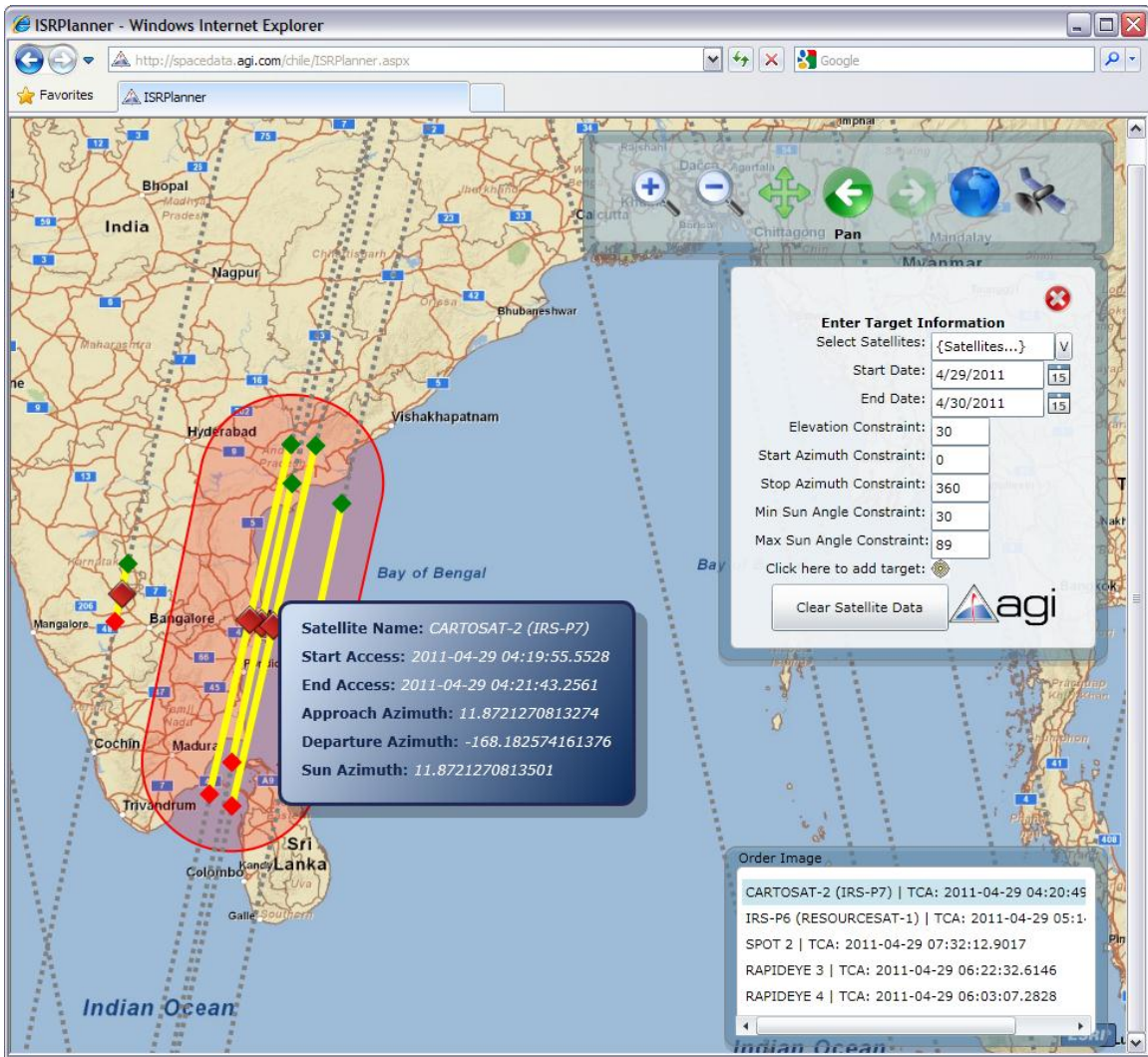


Figure 6. Satellite Overflight Portal, an AGI implementation of web-based satellite imagery planning system built with AGI software development kits and SOC sensor data

7. Conclusion – The satellite remote sensing industry has become a complex and challenging market to enter for those who are not already experts in the field. However, recent advances in software technology and data distribution allow anyone with the right set of tools to face this challenge easily and quickly. AGI’s commercial software and SOC data library are examples of such software/data combinations that empower users to save time, money and effort in the acquisition of remote sensing products.

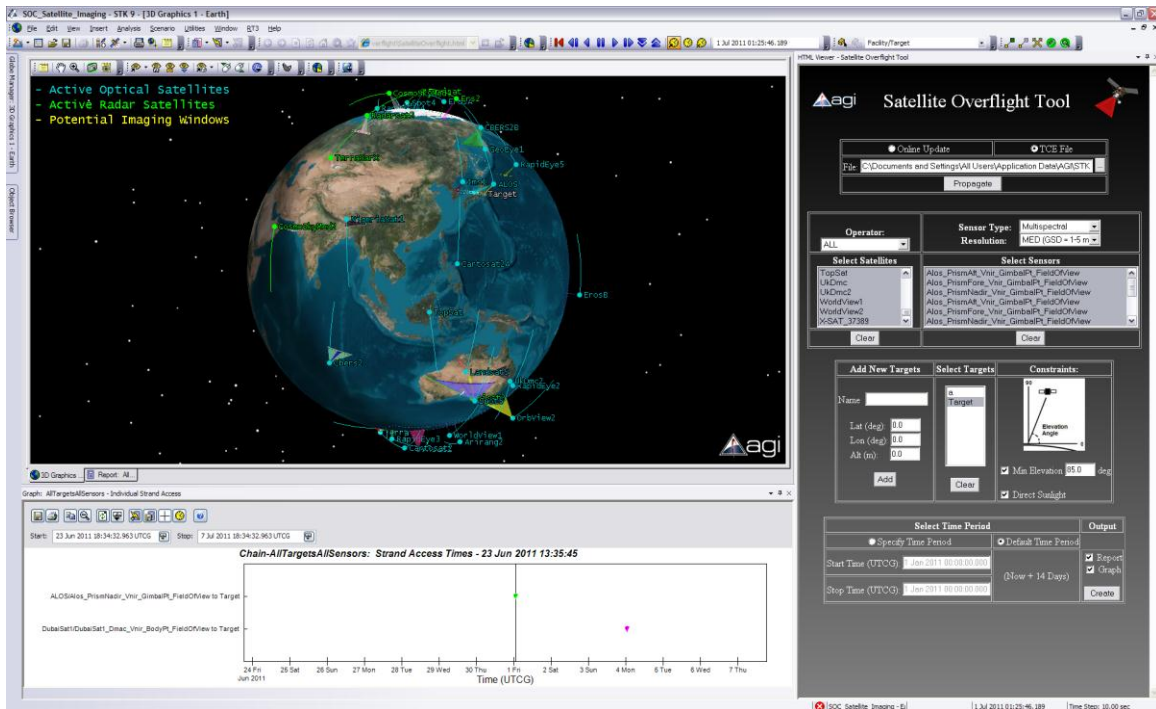


Figure 7. STK Desktop Software with “Satellite Overflight Tool” utility, enabling rapid searching of satellite overflight opportunities for given sensor capability criteria

References

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Biography

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Adam supports customer applications in the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia. He has been the lead engineer for AGI in the Asia-Pacific region providing training and coordination for customers and AGI business partners since 2009. Adam graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in aerospace engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is a graduate of the US Marine Corps Officer Candidates School in Quantico, VA.