
Supporting Multilateral Space Diplomacy

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Space diplomacy and international cooperation are essential foreign policy tools to maintain U.S. leadership in space exploration and commercial space activities and to preserve the access to and use of outer space as a domain that the United States relies on for its prosperity and security. As more nations become spacefaring, and as more foreign commercial entities become space actors, the United States needs to strengthen its space diplomacy and international cooperation initiatives to provide leadership in promoting wide international adoption of norms, standards, and best practices to enhance the safety, stability, and security of space activities.

Background

In order to get continued benefits from and use of space, the United States has relied on space diplomacy as a way to achieve this goal, as well as reinforcing U.S. leadership—in space and on Earth. Historically, U.S. diplomatic efforts have played a major role in the formulation, promotion, and implementation of the international laws and norms that guide space activities. The United States has also used diplomacy to strengthen its relationship with key allies and partners, with mutual benefits. In both its multilateral and bilateral engagements, the United States has helped enshrine U.S. values in the current global space governance regime and shape the regime to benefit U.S. interests. By doing so, the United States has led the world in working towards a safe, stable, and sustainable space environment.

Over the last decade, U.S. diplomatic efforts have faced new challenges. The international landscape for space has become more complicated, with a growing number of countries with diverse interests and capacities becoming involved in space activities and governance discussions. There are new types of activities in space that go beyond what the traditional governance regime for space has covered. Commercial actors have become increasingly dominant in Earth orbit and are conducting missions to the Moon, necessitating discussions in terms of how principles in the Outer Space Treaty should be applied in new contexts and circumstances not envisaged when the Treaty was adopted in 1967. Very large constellations have spiraled the number of active satellites upwards, challenging space situational awareness capabilities and highlighting the increasing need for space traffic coordination (STC) to ensure the safety of space operations. The steady proliferation of space debris also poses a growing challenge for the management of the orbital



environment. At the same time, there is renewed competition from China and Russia, each of whom is pushing its own space activities and attempting to seize diplomatic initiatives to advance its own interests. Counterspace capabilities are proliferating globally, and multilateral discussions are striving to come to consensus on what constitutes responsible behavior in space. The United States has been using diplomatic outreach to generate support for the Artemis Accords—its vision for the principles guiding civil exploration and use of celestial bodies for peaceful purposes—and has been able to, as of January 2025, encourage 53 countries to sign the Accords. Further, discussions continue at the United Nations on how to implement guidelines for the long-term sustainability of space activities, a process that the United States led and has been able to use to shape these evolving space governance mechanisms for the benefit of all nations.

Current Policy and Gaps or Shortcomings

There are several gaps in current U.S. space diplomacy initiatives that the new administration needs to address. First, the United States needs to scope an effective way to shape international consensus on practices and standards that could lead to a future space traffic coordination regime. Second, the United States must enhance international adherence to existing measures mitigating the continued growth of orbital debris, which represents an ever-increasing threat to satellites and human spaceflight. Third, the United States should develop and promulgate practical and consistent international principles for oversight of new commercial space activities such as large constellations, rendezvous and proximity operations, small satellites, commercial space stations, space resources activities, and other classes of commercial space operations. Finally, allies' and adversaries' counterspace capabilities pose grave risks for the stability and safety of space operations and could directly impact civil and commercial space systems of all nations.

The Artemis Accords provide a valuable opportunity to use space exploration as a tool of diplomacy in support of the United States' objectives to promote the rule of law in space to ensure the safety, stability, and security of space activities.

The United States also needs to play a stronger role in improving the effectiveness of the fora for multilateral space diplomacy. The principal forum for multilateral civil space diplomacy, the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), has made many valuable contributions to the governance of space activities during the past half-century, with much of the progress made due to U.S. leadership. With the rapidly evolving space landscape, COPUOS has focused on space sustainability with fruitful results, but it needs a clear direction in terms of agenda-setting for productive discussions on cooperative governance of new kinds of space activities. COPUOS is at a critical juncture in terms of its role as the leading international body for the progressive development of cooperative space governance. The United States should continue to demonstrate strong leadership in international space diplomacy as a way of strengthening the rule of law in outer space. In the absence of U.S. leadership, adversary countries may leverage these fora to their advantage.

The Conference on Disarmament (CD), the principal multilateral disarmament forum, has discussed practical measures to promote space security, such as transparency and confidence-building measures for space activities, or other norms of responsible behavior, with some success. However, discussions on the prevention of an arms race in outer space have been much less productive and are deadlocked, while there is disagreement in terms of what the biggest threats to space security are and whether a legally binding approach is necessary (or even possible) to mitigate those threats. The United States has used some of these international discussions



SPACE SUSTAINABILITY AND POLICY
A Strategic Briefing for U.S. Leadership



TOC



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to generate broad support for its commitment not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite (DA-ASAT) missile tests. Thus, the United States is well placed to provide more prominent leadership in these forums to enhance the safety, security, and sustainability of space activities as well as U.S. national interests. It is important to note that China and Russia will continue to engage in these fora, and would most likely jump at the opportunity to fill a leadership hole, should the United States withdraw from these discussions. It is also unclear what effect the Trump administration's call for the United States to develop and deploy space-based interceptors for boost phase missile defense will have on these international discussions, but it is likely going to make maintaining U.S. leadership in these discussions more challenging. ●



Policy Recommendations

→ Work with and through multilateral fora to help shape international consensus on norms of behavior, standards, and practices to enhance the safety and sustainability of space activities.

As noted previously, the rapid increase in the number of spacefaring countries, the rise of commercial actors, and the proliferation of counterspace capabilities globally are transforming the outer space environment and posing numerous challenges for all space actors. The United States cannot address these developments on its own, as it requires international cooperation both to promulgate the behaviors and best practices to ensure long-term sustainability and security, but also just due to sheer physics, the activities of a single actor have the potential to affect everyone's ability to continue to utilize space. Therefore, the United States should continue to actively pursue the development of norms of responsible behavior and provide leadership in the development of international consensus standards and best practices to enhance the security, safety, and sustainability of space activities through engagement with the appropriate international and multilateral fora. One of the norms the United States should continue to promote is the decision not to conduct destructive DA-ASAT missile tests.

→ Harness its leadership in space exploration to preserve the stability, safety, and security of the space environment and to support multilateral efforts to improve cooperative space governance.

Given the increasing number and diversity of spacefaring nations, international cooperation is becoming ever more important to preserve the stability, safety, and security of the space environment. The Artemis Accords provide a valuable opportunity to use space exploration as a tool of diplomacy in support of the United States' objectives to promote the rule of law in space to ensure the safety, stability, and security of space activities. It also provides an opportunity to engage new, nontraditional partners in emerging space countries. In this regard, the United States should continue to seek new signatories for the Artemis Accords, provide more tangible ways to link Accords signatories to Artemis Program participation as a way of solidifying partnership relationships and benefits, and use the momentum generated from signatories' support of the U.S. goals and policies to translate that into support of U.S. goals for COPUOS.

→ Use the expertise of domestic commercial and other nongovernmental stakeholders to achieve its international space diplomacy goals.

In support of the United States' engagement in international multilateral space diplomacy, particularly with regard to negotiations that may have domestic regulatory implications, it is important to engage domestic stakeholders to obtain their input so that the United States can help to provide sound leadership in these multilateral fora to develop pragmatic and workable solutions that are aligned with established best practices. In addition, the United States should harness the expertise in the commercial, academic, and nonprofit sectors to support engagement in both formal and informal multilateral dialogues that help to build and sustain international connections, relationships, information sharing, and confidence building.