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International cooperation at the final frontier: The State Department releases a new space diplomacy framework

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The United States Department of State (Department) recently released its first-ever Strategic Framework for Space Diplomacy[1] (Framework) outlining how the Department will advance the U.S. position as a global space leader and expand international cooperation on mutually beneficial space activities, while promoting responsible behavior by all space actors. The Framework is being released at a time of increased space activity and rising global tension, and if it is successful, it will be a step toward helping the nation to manage both.

Global space governance was born out of the Cold War era, when only the United States and the Soviet Union had access to spaceflight or launch capabilities. The five foundational United Nations space treaties, which constitute the backbone of the modern global space governance framework, are products of that time.

The Framework is intended to provide a roadmap and improved principles to help the United States and its allies tackle current space safety and sustainability challenges, such as congestion among near-Earth objects, debris remediation, recovery and reuse of space resources, and new satellite applications.

In the years since the treaties were signed, space activity has increased dramatically. The number and diversity of nations, private entities, and nontraditional actors in space has expanded, and the strategies and policies these entities follow sometimes conflict. Currently, the world lacks modern tools to resolve such conflicts, and that insufficiency grows more apparent as the number of objects in space grows.

According to Statista,[2] in 2011 there were approximately 1,033 active space satellites orbiting the Earth; by 2022, that estimate increased to 6,905. That tremendous increase in satellites has been accompanied by an increased risk of collisions. Earlier this year[3] the International Space Station (ISS) had to maneuver twice in just one week to avoid potential orbital debris collisions.

On March 6, 2023, the station shifted to avoid a projected collision with an Argentinian Earth observation satellite. Then on March 14, 2023, the station had to move again to avoid debris from Russia's November 2021 anti-satellite test. According to NASA, those two incidents were only the 34th and 35th maneuvers by the ISS to avoid collisions with tracked objects since 1999.

The increasing frequency with which space actors must avoid collisions as global space activities expand suggests that the five foundational treaties, with their emphasis on preventing the militarization and colonization of space, may be ill equipped to guide current international space challenges.

The White House has already taken some steps toward a new global framework for space governance. Seven Space Policy Directives issued between 2018 and 2020 helped to clarify U.S. policies and procedures as they related to space activities, with a particular focus on the partnership and public diplomacy efforts led by the Department in coordination with other executive branch departments and agencies. In addition, the December 2020 National Space Policy (NSP)[4] articulated the U.S. commitment to leading the responsible, peaceful, and sustainable exploration and use of outer space.

The NSP directed the Department to cooperate with like-minded international partners to establish standards of safe and responsible behavior, including openness, transparency, and predictability, with the goal of minimizing the negative impacts of space activities on the environment and reducing the potential for conflict. The United States Space Priorities Framework[5] released in December 2021 affirmed the nation's commitment to upholding and strengthening a rules-based international order for outer space activities by showcasing U.S. leadership in the responsible and sustainable use of space.

That framework was bolstered in October 2022 by the National Security Strategy,[6] which articulated the Biden administration's goal for the United States to maintain its position as the world's leader in space and demanded that the United States take the

lead in updating outer space governance, establish a space traffic coordination system, chart a path for future space norms and space control, and enhance the resilience of the U.S. space systems for critical national and homeland security functions.

Now, recognizing that space exploration is more congested, contested, and competitive than ever before, the Department has released its own Framework. The Framework is intended to provide a roadmap and improved principles to help the United States and its allies tackle current space safety and sustainability challenges, such as congestion among near-Earth objects, debris remediation, recovery and reuse of space resources, and new satellite applications. As space activity further develops, the Framework will continue to help the United States maintain a rules-based international order, foster cooperation among space actors, and encourage responsible behavior for long-term sustainability, safety, exploration, and space utilization.

The Framework acknowledges that U.S. competitors are organizing, training, and equipping their forces to undermine U.S. and allied security in space. It highlights that the unclassified version of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2023 Annual Threat Assessment states that China is steadily progressing toward its goal to match or surpass the United States as a space leader by 2045, noting that China's space activities are "designed to advance its global standing and strengthen its attempts to erode U.S. influence across military, technological, economic, and diplomatic spheres."

The unclassified assessment also notes that Russia remains a key space competitor, as it continues to train its military space elements and field new anti-satellite weapons to disrupt and degrade U.S. and allied space capabilities. Russia's cyberattack against commercial satellite communications networks in February 2022 illustrates the increasing interdependencies across space sectors and between the space and cyber domains.

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Despite those risks, the unclassified assessment also explains that Russia may have difficulty achieving its long-term space goals because of the effects of additional international sanctions and export controls following its invasion of Ukraine, a myriad of domestic space-sector problems, and increasingly strained competition for program resources within Russia.

It is not only foreign governments that the United States will have to coordinate with in order to ensure the safe and production exploration of space, however. In the past several decades, private companies and other entities have become involved in space. As the Framework explains, increasing commercial leadership and participation in space activities means that the Department cannot rely solely on traditional government-to-government diplomacy to establish the necessary compliance in safety and security and responsible behavior that will mutually benefit all space actors.

Instead, to achieve such goals, the Department will have to use both traditional government-to-government diplomacy as well as multistakeholder engagement with the U.S. and worldwide commercial space sector. The Framework further states that an inherent necessary tension exists between the Department's dual missions of protecting national security and promoting the U.S. space industry and the benefits of space for all. The Framework emphasizes, however, that the Department will not cede U.S. leadership to any spacefaring nation that does not share its values and its commitment to an international rule-based order.

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The Framework outlines specific actions for the Department across three main pillars:

- The first pillar involves advancing U.S. space policy and programs internationally, through bilateral and multilateral cooperation and partnerships, to further U.S. leadership in civil and commercial space activities, while simultaneously strengthening U.S. and allied capabilities and working to reduce the potential for unintended conflict or escalation.
- The second pillar involves leveraging U.S. space activities for wider diplomatic goals and strengthening the technical skills and knowledge of the Department's workforce to support the Framework's implementation. In that vein, the Department will pursue increased international cooperation in the use of satellite applications, remote sensing satellite imagery, and space-derived data to help solve urgent societal challenges and achieve U.S. foreign policy objectives on issues such as climate change and environmental sustainability; crisis management and conflict prevention; arms control and international security; economic competitiveness and prosperity; and human health. The Framework calls for all of that to be done while promoting U.S. standards, best practices, and democratic values, including through outreach to foreign publics.
- The third pillar involves providing diplomatic posts and the Department's workforce with the modernized skill set of tools and knowledge needed to successfully pursue space-related

objectives through all relevant bilateral and multilateral fora and mechanisms.

With the release of the new Framework, the Department has signaled a clear interest in furthering U.S. leadership in space and working toward crafting a governance structure built to handle technological innovation and expansion in space. It is hoped that the Framework will set the stage for a new era of international cooperation as humanity seeks to safely share space in space.

Notes

[1] https://bit.ly/3pr89TR

[2] https://bit.ly/44iJrUo

[3] https://bit.ly/3CTH2UG

[4] https://bit.ly/46GbZJR

[5] https://bit.ly/3XtdhU9

[6] https://bit.ly/3NwLJIT

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