SDS Brief

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Space activities across civil, commercial, and military domains highlight the need for effective diplomacy among established and rising powers. Grounded in coordination, collaboration, and shared strategic understanding, the need for such diplomacy has never been greater. The Annual Space Diplomacy Symposium (SDS) convenes policymakers, industry leaders, legal experts, strategists, and academics from around the world to elevate the role of diplomacy in outer space affairs. Through focused dialogue on emerging topics, the SDS platform provides a trusted venue for building the networks, relationships, and knowledge ecosystem to enable diplomatic solutions for peaceful uses of outer space.

Introduction by Dr. Saadia Pekkanen, Job and Gertrud Tamaki Endowed Professor of International Studies at the University of Washington

Keynote Address

Keynote speaker Esther Brimmer opened the Symposium with an assessment of space diplomacy grounded in her experience working in the U.S. government and her research with the Council on Foreign Relations' Securing Space task force. Brimmer argued that while there are impactful existing channels for space diplomacy, the U.S. must manage competition in the realm by promoting a diplomatic strategy which can successfully incorporate the private space sector. In offering potential avenues forward, Brimmer suggests we should draw insight from other fields which have successfully navigated private/public integration such as the maritime and aviation sectors. Brimmer argued that the U.S. needs to prioritize space and strengthen existing diplomatic channels by engaging with practical shared issues between public and private actors.

Military Space Diplomacy

The military space diplomacy panel, representing speakers with academic, military, diplomatic, and tech backgrounds, examined a wide variety of topics such as the development of norms of responsible behavior which incorporate commercial actors, the potential role of middle powers in leading diplomatic efforts, and the accelerating rate of change within space technology. A central theme which emerged from this conversation is that diplomacy is lagging behind technological development. The speakers argued that the space environment is changing rapidly and action taken in the next couple of years will determine whether space will be defined as a shared domain or a warfighting arena. They stressed the need for military, civil, and commercial collaboration to establish norms of responsible behavior. They also noted that such cooperation efforts were more likely to be successful with a focus on existing practical or regulatory issues in cross-sector forums.

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Civil Space Diplomacy

The civil space diplomacy panel emphasized the diversity of civil space activities, noting that the diplomatic needs of actors in this arena are far from uniform. While cautioning that science may no longer be the primary driver of space engagement, panelists stressed that scientists still play a vital diplomatic role in the realm. They highlighted existing influential civic diplomatic forums such as the International Telecommunications Union and the World Radiocommunication Conference. The speakers also noted that much of civil space diplomacy occurs through minilateral or bilateral collaboration, driven by practical disccusions among laboratories and companies to resolve potential conflicts in their scientific objectives. The panel concluded by calling for the protection of scientific institutions from political pressures and funding cuts, underscoring the unique value universities and civil organizations provide as spaces for learning and cross-disciplinary cooperation.

Commercial Space Diplomacy

The commercial space diplomacy panel explored emerging work in bioethics, space medicine, and space-based research, noting that progress is constrained by uncertainty about the future regulatory landscape. Panelists underscored challenges in applying Earth-based, consent-driven ethical frameworks to space and emphasized how differences in public and private sector research models complicate these issues. Considering privately funded research and missions, the panelists foregrounded substantial ambiguity about the operation of data sharing, the distribution of scientific advancements, the influence of profit motives on research priorities, the norms that will govern interactions among actors. The panel concluded by stressing the urgent need for international, cross-sector cooperation to develop regulatory frameworks that ensure ethical private and public engagement in space.

Key Takeaways:

Prioritize university-centered platforms for neutral convening cross-sector dialogues for space diplomacy.

Leverage existing practice and regulations to advance military space diplomacy which keeps up with rapid developments in dual-use technologies.

Build on existing forums and communities for networked public-private civil space diplomacy to resolve differences in scientific objectives.

Identify challenges from privately-funded research and missions to develop consent-driven ethical frameworks for medical and biological components in commercial space diplomacy.