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INTERNATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR U.S SPACE POLICY

Abstract

The new U.S. Administration is facing a wide range of international challenges and opportunities in space policy. This paper identifies the more significant issues that are likely to be of interest to the international space community, shows how they relate to other U.S. priorities, and what the central policy choices will be for the United States and other spacefaring states.

Space issues were not a major national factor in the 2008 election, however space technologies, and capabilities, and the associated symbolism of spaceflight are relevant to the major concerns of the Obama Administration. The stimulus of government-funded space technologies can improve the productivity and competitiveness of the U.S. economy. Encouraging commercial space activities through regulatory relief and government purchases can create new private sector economic opportunities. International cooperation on global environmental monitoring, disaster relief, space science missions, and human exploration offer opportunities for improving diplomatic relations and the image of the United States.

In the civil space sector, the central question is whether the United States will continue its efforts in pushing human exploration beyond low Earth orbit. Two successive, bipartisan Congressional authorizations have been encouraging but near term budget decisions will likely be decisive on the pace and scope of human exploration for the United States. Major cost increases for flag ship robotic mission such as the James Webb Space Telescope and the Mars Science Laboratory are constraining opportunities for new science missions. For both human and robotic missions, international participation is increasingly important in achieving not only the best science outcomes, but the political support and stability needed to implement the missions.

For practical applications of space, the most important international issues are likely to be those affecting common environments in space and on the Earth. International discussions on “rules of the road” in space, efforts to improve space situational awareness, and reduction of space debris should be of high priority to all space faring states. Similar discussions can be expected with regard to space and ground-based measures to verify compliance with international environmental agreements. Among the challenges for this discussions will be finding the right forums and venues that can include public and private sector interests, state parties as well as NGOs. In particular, attention will be needed to how best to include rising space powers such as India and China in the network of existing relationships.