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THE FUTURE OF THE COMMERCIAL REMOTE SENSING SECTOR: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF  
EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY, ECONOMIC, AND STRATEGIC FACTORS

**Abstract**

Commercial remote sensing efforts have a long history, which has included both successes (e.g. Digital Globe, Spot Image) and failures (e.g. privatization of Landsat). The current commercial remote sensing sector has a relatively small number of active companies, focusing primarily on sales of very high-resolution imagery to government customers. However, a number of new companies – PlanetLabs, Skybox, GeoOptics, PlanetIQ, and others – are poised to enter this industry, with new technologies and new business models. They also present new challenges and opportunities for governments. This paper looks at the evolution of the commercial remote sensing sector across technical, economic, and strategic areas. It examines the factors that caused past remote sensing efforts to succeed or fail, and how these factors may influence the likelihood of success for emerging remote sensing companies.

Government reaction to these emerging companies has been mixed. In some cases, the government has taken no action, choosing to be a passive bystander in the development of this industry. In other cases, the government has been proactive, laying the regulatory and legislative groundwork for their success, and making plans to act as a customer of these new products. Some governments may actually be hostile to these new entrants, seeing them as competitors in data production or sales.

Finally, considering all of these trends together – technical advancements, evolving business plans, and changing government-industry interaction – the paper looks at multiple scenarios for the future of the commercial remote sensing sector. What circumstances would lead to the growth of a robust commercial remote sensing industry, compared to a status quo or diminished sector? The paper ends with recommendations, particularly in the area of commercial-government interactions that could move this industry in the desired direction.