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COSPAR, A YOUNG 60-YEAR OLD SPACE RESEARCH ORGANISATION

Abstract

The Committee on Space Research (COSPAR) was established in 1958, as a platform for international cooperation in the nascent space exploration initiated by the then superpowers, with the launch of Sputnik, the first man-made Earth satellite by USSR on 4 October 1957, and of the US Explorer 1 satellite on 31 January 1958. The initiative of the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) aimed at providing an independent forum, outside the United Nations context in the time of Cold War, where scientists from these countries gathered. They were later joined by scientists from many other nations who could meet, discuss results, exchange ideas, and elaborate joint projects away from political barriers. Initially an ad hoc committee created for one year, COSPAR became an active organisation which purpose is still relevant 60 years afterwards. While the mission initially assigned to the Committee remains nowadays the promotion of scientific cooperation, its purview extends far beyond overcoming the past East-West antagonism. This paper will revisit the history of COSPAR, the evolution of its role and functioning over the decades to adapt to a changing geopolitical context, and highlight some of the achievements made possible through the opportunities offered by COSPAR Scientific Assemblies. How competition and cooperation interrelated in this arena, and whether the interaction between leading scientific figures and the space research community (or communities) impacted the trajectory of the organisation and decision-making in the space sector, will also be considered.

The 60th anniversary of COSPAR in 2018 offers a great opportunity to address some of the new challenges that the Committee is preparing to confront, at the eve of a significant paradigm shift.