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WHAT'S IN A NORM? DIPLOMATIC MECHANISMS AND STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING
INTERNATIONAL NORMS OF SPACE BEHAVIOR

Abstract

Over 50 years after the creation of the Outer Space Treaty, the use of diplomacy for space security continues to be sought after but is often seen as difficult, stagnated, or counterproductive. The ongoing debates over developing international norms of behavior for space revolve not only around what to include in a diplomatic initiative but also how to structure that initiative. Diplomatic tools are diverse and sometimes ill-defined, with different states, agencies, and experts favoring different kinds of approaches. While experts and officials discussing space diplomacy often recognize the need to use multiple tools in a comprehensive approach to space norms, each conversation tends to focus on one tool at a time instead of how to integrate multiple tools into a strategic plan.

To offer some insight into space security debates as they exist today and set the groundwork for taking a more strategic, whole-of-government approach in the future, this paper takes a comparative approach to study the strengths, weaknesses, similarities, and differences of different approaches to space diplomacy. The research revolves around a literature review, interviews with experts in space law and diplomacy, and data collected from the United Nations voting records, documented debates, and treaty registry. This paper breaks commonly-discussed approaches to developing norms into four categories for comparison and study: 1) 'Treaties' and legally-binding agreements; 2) 'Resolutions', here referring to written, non-legally binding agreements or guidelines negotiated in multilateral forums; 3) 'Communications', or statements and discussions highlighting acceptable and unacceptable behavior; and 4) 'Partnerships', comprising functional agreements and programmatic cooperation aiding in developing common principles. These tools are not mutually exclusive: many experts and officials would support most or all of these approaches if asked. However, the trend of focusing on one of these at a time in various publications and statements reveals the need for a more comprehensive strategy for how to make these tools work together in a whole-of-government approach. For some challenges, selecting the right tool for the right topic or situation could make a significant difference. There are some issues, however, that will provide similar obstacles and challenges no matter which tool is employed. Developing a comprehensive, strategic approach to international norms of behavior can make a significant contribution to building a more safe, secure, stable, and sustainable space environment.