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THE LUNAR CHESSBOARD: ASSESSING DIPLOMATIC STRATEGIES IN THE NEW SPACE AGE

Abstract

A significant portion of International Relations research on Outer Space focuses on legal issues and matters related to conflict, competition, and cooperation. Despite its crucial role in the development of a defined corpus iuris spatialis, Space Diplomacy, as an integrated process involving governmental and non-governmental actors, is still a niche topic.

In the realm of space activities, principles such as peaceful cooperation and mutual understanding are foundational, emphasising the notion that the collective welfare of humanity surpasses the interests of individual states - a departure from dynamics observed in other earthly domains. Nevertheless, Outer Space represents a common good rather than a public one, meaning that its overexploitation will inevitably prevent others from its use - leading to a phenomenon called “the tragedy of the commons”.

In the present era, marked by a significant surge in space launches and ambitious plans for lunar and Martian colonisation, successful diplomatic endeavours become imperative to foster mutual trust and mitigate the risk of conflict. The Moon, as our nearest celestial neighbour, is a telling example of Space Diplomacy in practice. The Moon’s lower surface gravity and the presence of polar ice deposits and raw materials, make it a convenient supply depot and a launch site for spacecraft travelling beyond our solar system. Further activities on the lunar surface will require a stronger human presence through the establishment of outposts. This, in turn, may pose concerns over the future ability to freely reach Earth’s satellite, potentially undermining the principle of freedom of exploration and use enshrined in International Space Law.

Increasing uncertainty about preserving the long-term sustainability of Outer Space activities is stimulating diplomatic actors to promote new norms of behaviour for conducting responsible and sustainable space operations, with particular emphasis on lunar activities.

This study critically assesses the US-led Artemis Accords and the Sino-Russian International Lunar Research Station as recent examples of Space Diplomacy. Through an analysis of secondary data and literature review on diplomatic practice, the success of these initiatives is evaluated. Notably, unlike other international obligations regulating space activities, these two programmes have not been advanced within the UN framework, making the efforts behind their formulation and adoption a compelling case study. Consequently, the authors aim to explore the evolving dynamics of the international community’s engagement with the UN-based space legal order and identify the determinants of successful diplomatic activities in outer space.