



ALTERNATIVE DIPLOMACY PATHWAYS

**AMID THE CRISIS OF GLOBAL
MULTILATERAL FORA**

Alternative Diplomacy Pathways Amid the Crisis of Global Multilateral Fora

International space governance has entered a phase of structural transition in which global multilateral **capacity is tightening precisely when operational demand accelerates**. The central challenge for policymakers is therefore not the erosion of multilateralism itself, but the widening gap between the pace at which space activities evolve and the ability of **established diplomatic forums** to produce timely outcomes.

Cooperation and norm development are now increasingly emerging through a broader set of existing and new pathways, including minilateral coalitions, regional platforms, and operational coordination mechanisms.

1 FROM UN-CENTRISM TO POLYCENTRIC SPACE GOVERNANCE

The global institutional anchor has not shifted away from the United Nations framework. Its normative legitimacy and universality remain indispensable, but the UN system’s ability to produce timely and effective outcomes is constrained.

“[...] our multilateral institutions are outdated. Our multilateral institutions do not reflect the world of today”.

A. Guterres, United Nations, 2023

The issue is therefore not the survival of multilateralism, but the emergence of a widening gap between (a) what the European and international governance of space activities requires and (b) what strained multilateral machinery can **reliably deliver at the speed of relevance**. Three dynamics are reinforcing one another.

- First, political polarisation has degraded the throughput of consensus-based diplomacy. Universal fora remain the only venues capable of conferring wide global legitimacy, yet the practical velocity of decision-making is challenged. Not because problems are insoluble, or due to a lack of good ideas, but because institutional procedures amplify distrust, and procedural consensus becomes a strategic instrument, making “agreement” harder.
- Second, the governance agenda has expanded faster than the bandwidth available to process it, also within Europe. Proposed million-satellite constellations, proximity operations, spectrum appetite, and new lunar ambitions generate a landscape demanding more coordination and a heterogeneous set of expertise. The agenda grows, while the system’s ability to deliver structured outputs weakens.
- Third, the UN liquidity crisis translates into an institutional constraint with consequences for delivery. Liquidity pressures are recognised as “*critically affecting delivery of mandated activities*”.¹ Shortly thereafter, the UN Secretary-General warned

¹ United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, *Statement by the Director of UNOOSA at the 68th session of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), 25 June 2025 (AM)*. Vienna, 2025. ([Link](#) - last accessed 17 March 2026)

of an “imminent financial collapse”, citing chronic late payments, structural rules that aggravate resource scarcity, and the prospect of significant Secretariat reductions.²

The aggregated result is clear: the system’s practical capacity to convene, support, sustain, and legitimise European and global space governance work is challenged.

2 BEYOND TRADITIONAL MULTILATERALISM

The transition is not a retreat from multilateralism, but a move where authority and influence are distributed across multiple nodes. **These models are not new, yet they are starting to exert greater influence on governance and norm development.** Sometimes this is their stated purpose; in other cases, it is simply the by-product of operational necessity.

Minilateral coalitions, regional platforms, regulatory power projection, and functional technical regimes have long coexisted with universal multilateral structures. What has changed is their relevance, as functional or specialised formats that are better able to adapt and produce timely outcomes.

In this environment, the strategic objective for countries across Europe, with an ambition to ensure a space governance framework aligned with European values and interests, is orchestration. In practice, this means leveraging these distinct pathways to **generate usable outputs for Europe and as input to and as part of global governance, without normalising fragmentation or a zero-sum game.**

2.1 Minilateral Coalitions Through Programmatic Buy-In

Small-group arrangements are increasingly where space “rules of the road” are **tried, legitimised, and operationalised**, often well before universal processes can react.



Artemis Accords

A non-binding, U.S.-led framework that serves as an operational reference point for cooperative lunar activities.

It accelerates norm socialisation among aligned participants, generating interoperability and more predictable conduct faster than treaty-making can. Structurally, governance is anchored to a lead actor and its programme ecosystem, agile and mission-driven, but inherently shaped by coalition membership and priorities.



The existence of two organising poles increases the likelihood that “lunar governance” develops through constellation-style competition and de facto practice before it is later consolidated in a universal framework.



ILRS (International Lunar Research Station)
A sino-russian cooperation track anchored in a distinct political-technical coalition, with its own partnership governance, standards, and mission architectures.

Minilateralism in space governance describes small-group coalitions that advance cooperation and normative practice outside universal, consensus-bound UN processes. It is important to note that it is not a mere by-product of bipolar rivalry. It also takes the form of functionally focused coalitions, such as the Space Working Group of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as Quad) or the BRICS remote-sensing satellite constellation, which institutionalise cooperation through pre-defined alliances.

Programme-based cooperation acts as a magnet, as participation in missions, industrial projects, including in public-private partnerships, or capability frameworks offers an accessible and politically palatable entry point. This is exemplified by the European Space Agency (ESA), which acts as Europe's main mechanism of programmatic and industrial cooperation at both intra-European and global levels. Yet the Artemis model seems out of sight, because European space cooperation is marked by a **level of dissonance between diplomatic and programmatic action**. Diplomatic initiatives often advance in one forum, while concrete programmes, capabilities, finance, and industrial partnerships are structured elsewhere.

The opportunity presents itself; ESA's success in deepening intra-European cooperation **generates its own gravitational pull in and beyond Europe**, as a proven, well-functioning model attracts global partners because it offers something proven and concrete to join. Canada's three-fold increase in contributions at ESA's 2025 Ministerial Council, reaching approximately 408 million EUR, illustrates the point that **a strong European ambition, paired with a capacity to deliver, makes Europe an increasingly attractive partner on the global stage**. This explains why global actors like Canada, Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and others are increasingly drawn towards cooperation with ESA. Europe should therefore better leverage these existing programmatic platforms, not only as scientific, technical, financial, or industrial instruments, but also by designing docking points between programmatic and diplomatic action.

In this way, **programmatic alignment facilitates diplomatic action**, structuring how standards, interoperability, and norms are socialised. In practice, these arrangements function as (i) enablers of more ambitious mission architectures, including architectures co-shaped or driven by Europe, (ii) catalysts for a larger European internal market, finance and industrial exports to foreign markets, and (iii) a political leverage to build global diplomatic coalitions well beyond the confines of the space sector.

2.1.1 Regional Governance Platforms

Regionalisation, which sits adjacent to minilateralism, is increasingly consolidating into a distinct governance layer that can generate capacity, standards, and services through shared infrastructure, pooled expertise, and coordinated institutional practice. Regional processes offer an implementable route to participation for emerging actors and can reduce capability asymmetries by lowering entry costs and providing trusted coordination mechanisms.

In policy terms, these regional nodes function as platforms for defining interoperability, data access, and operational support. Where regional approaches converge on compatible standards and interfaces, they can reinforce European and global coherence by generating replicable solutions and strengthening incentives for the wider adoption of common practices.

The African Space Agency, established by the African Union to promote coordination across the space policies of its 55 member states, became operational following its inauguration in Cairo in January 2024. Building on the AU African Space Policy and Strategy adopted in 2016 and the Agency structure approved in 2021 under Agenda 2063, AfSA provides a continental focal point for capacity building and policy alignment, and a natural hub for standard development and operational coordination.

In Europe, regionalisation unfolds across national, ESA, EU, and EUMETSAT governance layers. Within this stack, ESA shows the power of programmatic cooperation for international relations with countries like Canada, Japan, and Australia. In a different way, the EU SST consortium shows how federating national capabilities into shared operational routines, standardised data exchange, effectively scales coordination ahead of universal instruments.

AFRICA

ASIA
PACIFIC

APRSAF, established under Japanese leadership, is a broad, non-binding forum bringing together agencies, governments, industry, and academia from over 40 countries. It advances practical cooperation through working groups and a strong focus on disaster management and environmental protection. Unlike APSCO's more formal intergovernmental structure, APRSAF functions as an open coordination platform that helps diffuse shared practices across the wider Asia-Pacific space ecosystem.

Regional Governance Platforms

EUROPE

ARAB
REGION

The Arab Space Cooperation Group is a regional platform for policy coordination and programme delivery. It seeks to advance Arab space cooperation under the Arab League umbrella, activate partnerships to implement projects, provide advice to member states, and coordinate unified positions in international fora where possible. Currently, it brings together 14 member states.

2.2 Regulatory Power Projection: Governance via Market Access

Regulatory diplomacy has become a central instrument of governing space activities: actors with significant market power can shape global practice through licensing, market-access, and procurement conditions, without waiting for universal treaty outcomes.

Here too, Europe is making moves. The European Commission's **EU Space Act** proposal explicitly aims to harmonise rules across the Union on safety, resilience, and sustainability. Irrespective of the competitiveness impact, if done right, the proposed Act can serve as an effective diplomatic tool Europe could use to promote international regulatory convergence, at least with those actors keen to seize Europe's market. In parallel, ESA's **Zero Debris** approach, while not a regulatory instrument, articulates operational sustainability targets that can drive procurement standards, mission design, and behaviour expectations, with spillover effects through partnerships and industrial supply chains.

In this context, governance operates through structures that allow expectations and behaviours to converge. Consensus is still needed within national or regional processes, but once adopted, **adopted rules can inform behaviour beyond their formal jurisdiction**. In practice, operators respond to the pressure created by market access, insurance conditions, licensing regimes, and reputational considerations.

2.3 De Facto Norms from Operational Necessity

Operational necessity generates technical coordination networks that function irrespective of political gridlock. Data-sharing arrangements, operator best practices, and service-to-service interfaces often evolve first as *technical regimes* and only later seek formal legal endorsement. Initiatives such as the **Space Data Association (SDA)**, facilitating data sharing among satellite operators to reduce collision risks, the **Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee (IADC)**, shaping debris mitigation guidelines, or the **CONFERS Consortium**, developing recommended practices for on-orbit servicing, illustrate how operational communities establish shared technical baselines ahead of formal diplomatic agreement.

These regimes are not legally “nothing.” Over time, they can build the substrate from which soft law, operational standards and eventually customary expectations can crystallise. Provided they remain documented, inclusive, and connected back to universal fora, such practices can inform multilateral discussions and contribute to the evolution of internationally recognised norms.

3 THE ROLE OF COMPLEMENTARY ACTORS

The relevant issue is not providing judgement but assessing how alternative diplomatic pathways can help address functions that strained global multilateral fora struggle to perform. As sources of *space diplomacy* diversify, a number of gaps emerge between the formal legitimacy of universal institutions and the operational realities.

- First, there is a **confidential dialogue gap**. Universal diplomatic fora are indispensable for legitimacy, but their formal procedures and political visibility constrain the scope for candid exchanges. They are also not designed to convert fast-evolving practice into timely policy outcomes. Discussions related to fields such as proximity operations, on-orbit SSA, or incidents with high collision risk require a degree of technical openness and discretion that formal negotiating settings do not easily accommodate. Yet early exchanges on such issues can be critical for reducing misperception and preventing the escalation.
- Second, there is a **continuity gap in diplomatic interaction**. Multilateral diplomacy proceeds according to institutional calendars, negotiating mandates, and available secretariat support. In periods of tension or resource constraint, the tempo of official engagement slows down, precisely when governance challenges are accelerating. In such circumstances, maintaining channels for informal dialogue and policy probing

becomes important for preserving a minimum level of diplomatic continuity between formal negotiation cycles.

- Third, there is a **docking gap between polycentric governance outputs and multilateral legitimacy**. Minilateral, regional, regulatory, and operational developments produce concrete outputs. Yet these outputs do not have clear pathways to dock themselves into universal diplomatic processes. Without deliberate efforts to document, interpret, and socialise these developments, useful innovations risk remaining fragmented or politically contested rather than contributing to the gradual evolution of globally recognised norms.
- **Fourth, there is a forum coherence gap**. Space governance is no longer shaped only in dedicated multilateral settings. It is increasingly discussed across a wider range of diplomatic and regulatory arenas, including cybersecurity, connectivity, digital, defence, trade, and sustainability. While this reflects the growing strategic relevance of space, it also risks creating new institutional silos.

Among ongoing efforts in formal settings, **institutions operating outside formal diplomatic mandates can play a particularly important enabling role**. By convening discreet exchanges, supporting Track 1.5 dialogues, and translating technical and operational developments, together with public and private funding realities, into analysis that is relevant to policy, these actors help sustain and advance communication and make new and still-evolving knowledge more useful, shaping recommendations and proposals for decision-making.

ESPI contributes to such functions through its convening platforms, such as its support to the European Interparliamentary Space Conference (EISC) and the **Vienna Space Diplomat**, functioning as part of a wider Space Policy Forum, visiting & global fellow schemes, analytical outputs, and engagement with policymakers, finance and industry, and European and international partners. The value of these activities lies not in substituting multilateral diplomacy but in helping bridge functional gaps when formal mechanisms face political or institutional constraints, within Europe and globally.

“Think tanks are essential to research and debate in Europe. It is crucial that the Commission continues to support them: they play a vital role in sustaining our European public space and advancing the European policy conversation.”

B. Haddad, French Minister Delegate for European Affairs, 2026

4 OVERCOMING GOVERNANCE GAPS THROUGH NEW STRENGTHS

Faced with a deadlock in universal diplomatic fora, where Europe has traditionally implemented a significant share of its foreign policy action, the continent can reinvigorate its drive for autonomy and global significance by innovating new forms of support to diplomatic engagement on two key fronts.

First, Europe should maximise the existing arsenal of programmatic schemes through ESA, EUMETSAT, and the EU Space Programme, which, to different degrees, already attract international partnerships, yet are not fully leveraged to support national and European

“Of the many influences on U.S. foreign policy formulation, the role of think tanks is among the most important and least appreciated”.

R. N. Haass, U.S. Department of State, 2002.

foreign policy goals and safeguard European values.

Second, Europe must further leverage its existing network of independent think tanks (e.g. EUISS, ESPI, FRS,

SWP, IAI, ...) to deepen its insights and expand its foundations in Europe and its reach into regions and domains where competing global actors are vying for influence and power.

This dual-track approach can transform diplomatic stagnation into an opportunity that will allow Europe to shape the global order of tomorrow.

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