

Report on UNISPACE '82

The United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space

Vienna, Austria, August 9-21, 1982

Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications
Committee on Science and Technology
U.S. House of Representatives

Summary

Ninety-four nations vitally interested in space attended the UNISPACE '82 Conference. Therefore, the United States was presented a great opportunity to demonstrate its progress in space for the benefit of all mankind.

The United States did not seize this opportunity. The United States instead adopted a defensive posture and did not adequately accentuate its past accomplishments nor demonstrate its willingness to aggressively pursue cooperative international space programs. Although it can be argued that the United States did succeed in protecting its interests in the conference, in some instances its public positions could be characterized as intransigent.

The single issue attracting most attention at UNISPACE '82 was "militarization of space." The United States virtually ignored this issue, for example in its plenary statement. This omission, following the President's July 4 space policy statement emphasizing military programs, signalled to many delegations that the United States is now mainly interested in military applications. Thus, an opportunity to accentuate the positive—the outstanding U.S. civil space program—was missed.

The second most discussed issue was allocation of the geostationary orbit. Less-developed nations expressed concern that because of physical limitations the orbit will be "filled" before they can take advantage of it, although the finite lifetime of satellites means that slots will continue to open if "dead" satellites are pushed out of the orbit. The United States asserted that technological advances will mitigate these limitations but did not effectively demonstrate to other delegations how this would occur.

The United States chose to spend only a few months preparing for the conference, and named its delega-

tion only days before the conference began. Thus, in part our defensive posture may have been due simply to lack of preparation of the delegation.

During preparations for the conference, representatives of the Administration contended that the discussion would be technical and that political issues would not arise (e. g., this was stated at briefings and hearings). The opposite was true, the conference was highly political, and not just technical.

Congress could have been brought more effectively into the preparations for the conference. For example, Congress was given the "official" position on certain issues, and was not made privy to how the issues would be dealt with at the conference.

There was not enough private sector involvement in the Conference. Representatives of the entrepreneurial private sector should have played a larger role in UNISPACE because the future of the United States' civil space program probably lies largely in that sector, while in most other nations space is a nearly exclusive government function. As it was, few private sector representatives—delegates or exhibitors—were asked or allowed to participate substantively in the conference or in preparations for it.

Many delegations from developing nations seemed virtually interested in benefits space could bring to them, especially in communications and remote sensing. Several nations stressed the importance of LANDSAT data continuity.

At the same time, the developing nations were wary of possible negative impact of space technology on their nations interests even in communications and remote sensing. In communications, for example, concern was expressed that direct broadcasts from satellites to individual receivers would introduce unwanted information into their countries. Concern was also expressed that the "open skies" policy of the United States, i.e., nondiscriminatory access to remote-sensing

data, would disclose secret information about the sensed country to its adversaries. The United States must address these inherently political issues.

The United States should recognize that United Nations conferences are a fact of international politics and

plan to take advantage of them. These conferences must be prepared for carefully and wisely, and attended by a well-informed, coordinated delegation in order to best represent and advance U.S. interests.