
Chapter 3

Origins of the Conference and U.S. Objectives

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THE 1968 CONFERENCE

In 1964, members of the Technical Subcommittee of the Committee on Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) proposed a United Nations (U.N.) conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.^{*} Their intent was to inform and educate developing countries about the significance and usefulness of space systems and to encourage use of space technology. COPUOS considered the Subcommittee's proposal that same year and set up a working group composed of its entire membership to examine the desirability of holding such a conference. In 1966, the General Assembly endorsed the working group's proposal.[†] The primary objectives of this conference were to be:

- a examination of the practical benefits to be derived from space research and exploration on the basis of technical and scientific achievements and the extent to which non-space powers, especially the developing countries, may enjoy these benefits, par-

* Prior to this, the U.S. S.R. had announced that it would propose the calling of an international conference of scientists under JN auspices, on the question of exchange of experience in the study of outer space. General Debate U.N., General Assembly 823 Plenary Meeting, Oct. 6, 1959.

[†]"Report of the Working Group of the Whole," U.N. Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, A/AC.105/30, Jan. 26, 1966.

UNISPACE '82

The rapid progress of space exploration and technology that followed the 1968 conference suggested to some that a second conference was necessary to exchange information and experience, and to assess the adequacy of institutional and operative means that were being used to realize the benefits of space technology.[‡] Such a con-

[‡]U.N. General Assembly Resolution 34/67 of Dec. 5, 1979.

ticularly in terms of education and development; and

- an examination of the opportunities available to nonspace powers for international cooperation in space activities, taking into account the extent to which the U.N. may play a role.[§]

The first U.N. Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space was held in Vienna in August 1968. A. H. Abdel-Ghani, then Chief of the Outer Space Affairs Division, was appointed Executive Secretary and Kurt Waldheim, then Chairman of COPUOS, served as President of the Conference. The conference was attended by 78 States, nine specialized U.N. agencies and four other international organizations.

Although this conference produced few tangible results, it generated two proposals that were carried out: one to create a U.N. Space Applications Program, which provides technical assistance to developing nations through workshops, seminars, and training, and a second to establish working groups in COPUOS to study such questions as remote sensing, and direct broadcast satellites (DBS).

[§]GAOR/23 AI 24, Report of COPUOS A 7285.

ference was suggested to COPUOS by its Scientific and Technical Subcommittee in 1974;[¶] in November 1978 the General Assembly agreed to convene a second U.N. Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.[§]

[¶]Report of the Second United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, A/CONF.101/10, p. 107.

[§]U.N. General Assembly Resolution 33/16 of Nov. 10, 1978.

Between the proposal in 1974 and the General Assembly resolution of 1978, the United States gave no encouragement to those who desired a second conference on outer space. Its reluctance stemmed primarily from doubts about the usefulness of such a conference. In the view of the United States, the 1968 conference had accomplished little; what little it did achieve was not necessarily in best interests of the United States. The establishment of an organization such as the Space Applications Program was contrary to the U.S. policy to conduct its cooperative technology programs largely on a bilateral basis (see app. B for NASA's rationale). The working groups established by the first conference to study such questions as remote sensing and DBS had been unable in the intervening decade to resolve the politically sensitive issues surrounding transborder remote sensing and broadcasting. Further, since then, U.N. sponsored conferences had become increasingly politicized; the United States wished to avoid a confrontation on the basic issues of the New International Economic Order.

Given that the conference would take place, the decision about who would be Secretary General caused little difficulty, as Yash Pal of India, a distinguished physicist and space scientist, was the first choice of many delegations. Selecting the conference venue was somewhat more difficult.

The U.S.S.R. and India both had offered to act as host for the conference. It appeared initially that the conference would be held in Moscow. This would have been politically desirable for the Soviets since 1982 marked the 25th anniversary of the launch of Sputnik. However, such a decision would have contravened a long-accepted understanding that the conference would not be held on the territory of either of the space powers. On the basis of U.S. and other opposition, the Secretary General of the U.N. chose Vienna as a compromise.

The venue established, the United States began to plan its conference participation. By January 1981, an interagency group, including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and headed by the State Department's Bureau of Ocean and International Environment and Scientific Affairs (OES), had completed a

draft of the U.S. national paper and had contacted the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics to ensure private sector participation at the conference. Shortly thereafter, a dispute in the U.N. Outer Space Affairs Division caused the United States to halt its preparation for the conference.

The normal procedure for staffing a conference such as UNISPACE '82 is that the Chief of the Outer Space Affairs Division (OSAD) in the U.N. Secretariat becomes the Executive Secretary of the conference. During the preparation for UNISPACE '82 the position of Chief of OSAD had become vacant. An American, Marvin Robinson, who had served in OSAD for 19 years and who had risen to Deputy Chief, was, in the opinion of the United States and others, the most qualified candidate for the position. In the organizational structure of the U.N., OSAD comes under the Department of Political and Security Council Affairs (see fig. 2), headed by a Soviet citizen. Recognizing that the duties of the OSAD Chief would include the function of Executive Secretary of UNISPACE '82, the Soviets proposed Vladimir Kopal, a Czech space lawyer with no OSAD experience, for the vacant position. Despite strong U.S. opposition, the Soviets refused to withdraw their candidate. In response, the U.S. representative to the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee of COPUOS announced that the United States would have to reassess its commitment to the conference.^b

The State Department and the interagency group working on UNISPACE '82 activities early in 1981 halted most conference preparation in order to stress the seriousness of the U.S. position. Not all concerned U.S. parties agreed with the wisdom of this course of action. On September 21, 1981, members of the House Committee on Science and Technology sent a letter to then Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Jr. * urging an early, positive decision to participate in the sec.

*Letter from Richard Fairbanks, Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, Department of State, to the Hon. Ronnie G. Flippo, House of Representatives, Oct. 9, 1981.

^bThe letter was signed by Don Fuqua, Chairman; Larry Winn Ranking Minority Member; Ronnie G. Flippo, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications, and Harold C. Holenbeck, Subcommittee Ranking Minority Member.

ond U.N. Conference on Space.⁷ The letter noted that:

Since the commitment to peaceful exploration and utilization of space represents what we as a Nation stand for, it would be unfortunate if the United States did not fully participate.⁸

In a similar letter sent to James L. Buckley, then Under Secretary for Security Assistance, Science and Technology, the same members expressed the fear that in the absence of U.S. participation, the Soviets might use UNISPACE '82 to the disadvantage of the United States.⁹ They referred to the

⁷Report on UNISPACE '82, Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications, Committee on Science and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, July 14, 1982.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

recent attempts by the Soviets to characterize the Space Shuttle as a weapon and noted that:

To allow such claims to go unanswered by our government in a forum such as UNISPACE '82 would be a mistake.¹⁰

Since January 1981, the State Department had been trying to achieve a compromise at the U.N. However, the dispute remained unresolved until December 19, 1981, when as his last act as Secretary General of the U. N., Kurt Waldheim appointed Robinson as Acting Chief of the Division to become Chief on the opening day of the conference. Nandasiri Jasentuliana of Sri Lanka was named Executive Secretary of UNISPACE '82. The United States then began to prepare in earnest for UNISPACE '82.

¹⁰Ibid.

U.S. PREPARATION FOR THE CONFERENCE

The Preparatory Meetings

Ostensibly, UNISPACE '82 was to be a scientific and technical meeting to discuss the practical uses of space technology, especially in developing countries. The United States had early expressed its hope that controversial political issues would be kept off the agenda.

The standard U.N. practice in preparing for conferences of the size and scope of UNISPACE '82 is to write a draft report before the actual conference so that consensus can be reached on as many issues as possible. The draft report for UNISPACE '82, submitted to COPUOS by the UNISPACE '82 Secretariat in January 1982, was ~ 116 page document containing 428 paragraphs. The original version of the draft report strongly reflected the personal and national views of its principal author, Yash Pal of India, and seemed to the United States to be unduly responsive to the political agenda of the Group of 77.

The United States took advantage of its opportunities to modify the draft report both at the COPUOS UNISPACE '82 Advisory Committee meeting in January 1982, and the March-April '82 DOPUOS meeting. On the surface, the nations who participated in these preparatory meetings

accomplished a great deal in agreeing to all but 15 of the 428 paragraphs of the draft report. Paragraphs for which consensus was not possible, along with suggested alternatives, were included in the final draft in brackets. This apparent success was somewhat deceptive since some of the changes in wording tended to "paper over" real issues for the sake of arriving at consensus. In most instances, the unresolved issues became the source of considerable controversy at UNISPACE '82.

Congressional Interest

The issue of "militarization" of space and questions about the future of the U.S. civilian space program and the role of the private sector in outer space created congressional interest in UNISPACE '82. Of primary importance were the congressional perceptions that:

The hiatus in U.S. UNISPACE '82 seemed to have prevented the thorough planning preparation necessary for effective conference participation.

- In the "eleventh hour" the United States was still insisting that this was a purely technical

¹¹Report on UNISPACE '82, op. Cit

conference and therefore it would not be prepared to discuss political matters.

- Insufficient attempts were being made by the United States to diffuse the political issues that had arisen in the preparatory meetings.
- The full list of delegates would be decided too late to prepare the delegates sufficiently for the relatively complex political issues that were sure to arise in Vienna.
- The attitude of those in charge of conference preparation was that there was little to gain by U.S. participation and much to lose.
- Sufficient consideration had not been given to the private sector's role at UNISPACE '82; in particular, preparations for the U.S. exhibit were late in getting underway.

Both the Subcommittee on Space Science and Applications of the House Committee on Science and Technology and the Subcommittee on International Operations of the House Foreign Affairs Committee held UNISPACE '82 hearings on July 14, 1982 and August 5, 1982, respectively. At these hearings James Beggs, Administrator of NASA, who was serving as Head of the U.S. Delegation with the rank of Ambassador, and Ambassador Gerald Helman, the special coordinator for UNISPACE '82, addressed some of the congressional concerns. Members used these hearings as an opportunity to make suggestions about conference preparations.

In their prepared statement and responses to the Members' questions, Beggs and Ambassador Helman expressed guarded optimism. The hearings disclosed that although the boycott had made conference preparation difficult, the United States would be prepared to participate fully at UNISPACE '82. Beggs stated that the delegation would be ready to discuss political issues and that

there would be a strong private sector presence on the delegation and at the U.S. exhibit. In a joint statement, Beggs and Ambassador Helman declared that the administration viewed the conference as an opportunity for the United States to reaffirm its commitment to international co-operation and to emphasize our role as the world leader in space.

It was clear from testimony given by others that the UNISPACE '82 preparatory activities had not been as extensive as those for other international conferences. Ambassador Jean Wilkowski, coordinator for the U.S. delegation to the 1979 U.N. Conference on Science, Technology, and Development, testifying at the July 14 hearing, stated that U.S. preparation for previous international conferences had benefited considerably from the close involvement of outside advisors (eg., Congress, citizens advisory groups, key persons in industry, universities, and foundations) and from thorough analytical studies. This had not been done as extensively for UNISPACE '82.

During the July 14, 1982 hearings, several Congressmen expressed misgivings about the fact that, with only a few weeks left before the conference, the full delegation had not yet been named. By the hearings on August 5, less than a week before the conference was to convene, the delegation had been named, but the list was not yet available to the Congress. The delay in naming the nongovernmental delegates, generally attributed to indecision on the part of the Executive, resulted in there being only one briefing of the delegation before departing for Vienna. The delegation when named, was composed of a variety of well informed and experienced representatives from numerous government agencies, Congress, and the private sector. (For the delegation list see app. F)