

Space Diplomacy: Space Sustainability

WORKSHOP SUMMARY

Riyadh, 27 January 2026

Background

The Centre for Space Futures (CSF), and the European Space Policy Institute (ESPI) have partnered to organize an interactive workshop to examine the role that diplomacy can play in reconciling the latent tension between national interests and the inherently international nature of the space debris challenge.

Given that the workshop was held on the sidelines of the Space Debris Conference in Riyadh, it focused on leveraging space diplomacy to advance space sustainability.

The Context

Building on the findings of the insight report [Clear Orbit, Secure Future: A Call to Action on Space Debris](#), co-authored by CSF and the World Economic Forum (WEF), the workshop was designed to translate analytical insights into policy-driven dialogue.

The discussion was structured using a Menti-driven, interactive format and organized around three thematic pillars:

- I. **Framing the Debate** – establishing a common baseline with the participants about the space debris challenges and aligning perspectives on the current orbital environment.
- II. **National Priorities versus International Challenges** - exploring the tension between national sovereign interests and international conduct required to address space debris as a global challenge.
- III. **Short-Term versus Long-Term Tensions** - examining how immediate operational, economic, and political considerations interact with the need for sustained, long-term stewardship of the orbital environment.

Framing the Debate

Participants focused on three core dimensions shaping the space sustainability debate within the context of diplomacy in terms of space sustainability as a diplomatic issue, a driver of national space policy and international positioning, and the key enablers and constraints affecting progress.

The responses from the participants show that engagement with space sustainability has most frequently occurred

through scientific and technological channels, followed by multilateral diplomacy, and a comparatively limited level of engagement for political and defense-related purposes. When asked whether space sustainability is currently recognized as a policy priority, most respondents answered affirmatively, while a smaller yet notable group expressed uncertainty or skepticism regarding its actual prioritization in practice. In relation to motivations for addressing space debris, respondents identified national security considerations, the protection of space assets, and orbital safety as the leading drivers, while industrial first-mover advantage was reported far less frequently. Finally, when asked about barriers to progress, participants mostly reported concerns around industrial competitiveness and the lack of shared international standards as the primary challenges.

National priorities versus International Challenges

Across the range of discussion topics related to space debris, participants identified broadly consistent constraints when assessing diplomatic and governance approaches, including those related to active debris removal (ADR). Transparency and confidence-building measures emerged as the most frequently prioritized actions, followed by multilateral norm development and institutional convergence. By contrast, bilateral arrangements and purely national approaches were selected less frequently. At the same time, most of the participants expressed the view that states are not yet ready to accept constraints on their freedom of action in orbit, while a smaller group indicated doubt or uncertainty, and only a limited number suggested that such readiness already exists.

Short-Term versus Long-Term Tensions

Participants were asked to rank the main factors constraining progress on space sustainability and debris-related action. Concerns over industrial competitiveness emerged as the number one limiting factor. In the word-cloud exercise, “lack of standards” dominated as the single biggest obstacle. Other responses fell under the themes of structural and institutional weaknesses and political and relational challenges, with resource and capability constraints being less mentioned.

Responses also revealed a structural gap in the high political feasibility quadrant of the political-feasibility vs. sustainability-impact matrix, noting the absence of concrete and readily actionable measures. However, looking ahead to the next 5-7 years, shared risk-mapping systems for debris prioritization and international pilot demonstration missions for ADR were viewed as politically feasible, despite limited near-term sustainability impact expectations.

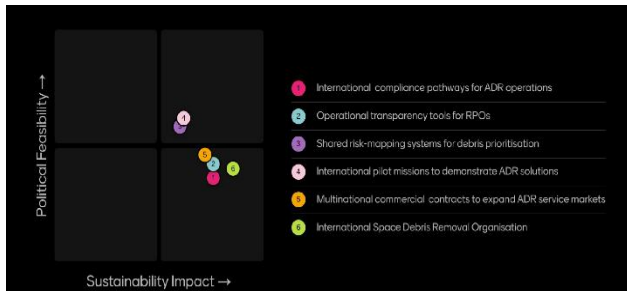


Figure 1: 2x2 Matrix (Impact Axis vs. Feasibility Axis)

Key Takeaways

Discussions highlighted that space sustainability and debris are primarily approached through scientific, technological, and multilateral diplomatic perspectives; with national security, asset protection, and orbital safety emerging as the main drivers for engagement. Progress remains constrained by industrial competitiveness concerns and the persistent absence of shared international standards. While space sustainability is widely recognized as a policy-relevant issue, participants expressed limited confidence in states' readiness to accept coordinated constraints on freedom of action in orbit, underscoring ongoing trust and governance challenges.

Against this backdrop, priority actions should focus on strengthening transparency and confidence-building measures, accelerating convergence on shared standards, and advancing incremental multilateral pathways to reduce uncertainty for both states and industry.

Implications for Future Diplomatic Action

The workshop highlighted how diplomacy functions as a practical mechanism for negotiating national interests with collective orbital sustainability objectives. It identified key diplomatic leverage points for balancing short-term national requirements with long-term sustainability, while surfacing trade-offs between industrial competitiveness, national security, and international governance constraints.

Through expert-driven interaction, the dialogue highlighted areas of convergence, persistent tensions, and blind spots that continue to shape diplomatic approaches to space debris.

Next Steps

- Synthesize workshop insights into a consolidated outlook.
- Conduct targeted follow-on consultations to validate priorities and actions reported from the workshop.

- Engaging the overall stakeholders for strategic guidance.
- Conduct similar workshops in additional regional and institutional contexts.

Participating Organizations

The workshop brought together more than 15 international participants from embassies in Saudi Arabia, representing Austria, Algeria, Bahrain, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan.

Participating entities included CSF, Italia Embassy, US Embassy, ESPI, EUSST, CNES, ASI, DLR, UNOOSA, UKSA, BSA, WEF, IAF, Celestia Space, the University of Tokyo, Space Exchange, the Saudi Space Agency, and others.

The workshop was instructed by Alberto Rueda Carazo (ESPI), Marco Aliberti (ESPI), and Veronica La Regina (CSF).

Opening remarks and closing conclusions were delivered by Mishaal Ashemimry (CSF), representing the local hosting partner.

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