Beijing's Burgeoning Space Diplomacy in the Global South

By Matthew P. Funaiole, Brian Hart, and Aidan Powers-Riggs

KEY TAKEAWAYS

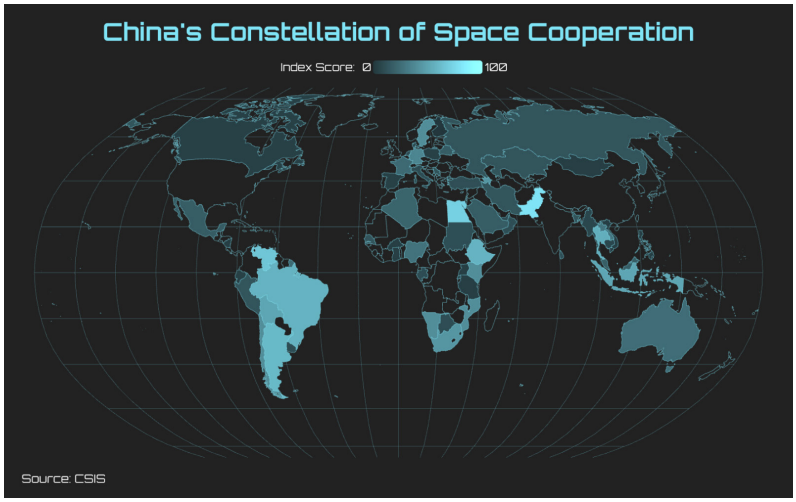
- China has emerged as the leading space partner for the developing world. Since 2000, it has engaged 64 countries across the globe on space—75 percent of them in the Global South. This has given Beijing significant influence in regions where U.S. and European engagement is limited.
- China is rapidly expanding its physical space footprint in Africa through newly built or upgraded facilities in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Namibia. These sites provide turnkey capabilities and contribute to a growing dual-use ground network operated by firms linked to the People's Liberation Army (PLA).
- China's commercial space firms are already supporting U.S. adversaries. Companies such as Spacety and Chang Guang Satellite Technology have provided satellite imagery to the Wagner Group and the Houthis, illustrating how China's global space ecosystem can be used in active conflicts.
- U.S. companies remain global leaders in many space technologies, but without increased policy attention, the United States risks ceding critical emerging space markets to China. This will reduce commercial opportunities for U.S. firms and limit Washington's ability to shape norms, standards, and security outcomes in space.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Countries across the Global South are seeking to participate in the rapidly growing space economy to advance economic development and national security goals. Many lack the capital, skilled workforce, or industrial base to build space capabilities on their own. As China's space sector has matured, Beijing has positioned itself as a comprehensive partner by offering bundled services that span satellite manufacturing, launch, ground infrastructure, and training, lowering barriers to entry for developing countries.

To assess the scale of this engagement, CSIS developed the China Space Cooperation Index, which tracks China's space activities across five indicators: satellite contracting, launch services, ground infrastructure, multilateral initiatives, and bilateral partnerships. Since 2000, China has engaged 64 countries in at least one of these areas, with about three-quarters of partners located in the Global South. The highest-scoring countries, including Pakistan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Venezuela, and Argentina, demonstrate long-term and multifaceted cooperation with China in the space domain.

China's overseas engagement carries inherent dual-use risks, as civilian satellites and ground stations abroad can also support China's military communications, intelligence collection, and space surveillance. Several facilities have been built or are operated by Chinese state-owned defense firms with ties to the PLA, raising concerns that commercial and scientific cooperation may advance Beijing's security objectives.



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LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Congress has begun to focus the challenges posed by China's expanding space sector. In 2025, the House Science, Armed Services, and Foreign Affairs Committees held hearings on China's space ambitions, its military-civil fusion strategy, and the risks associated with dual-use commercial technologies. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2025 annual report included an in-depth examination of China's space strategy and its use of space cooperation to expand its overseas influence.

In 2026, Congress is positioned to take a more active role in shaping the U.S. response. Expanded oversight and potential legislation will be needed to assess whether existing authorities are sufficient, identify coordination gaps across the federal government, strengthen cooperation with allies and partners, and better integrate space policy into broader technology competition with China. Decisions made now will shape whether U.S. firms can compete effectively in emerging space markets over the next decade—which may have major economic and strategic ramifications.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS

- **National Security:** China's expanding global network of ground stations and data relay infrastructure reduces gaps in its space coverage and speeds access to satellite data worldwide. Many facilities have been built or are operated by Chinese entities linked to the PLA, raising concerns about intelligence collection and military use. These risks are demonstrated by U.S. sanctions on Chinese space companies that supplied satellite imagery to the Wagner Group and the Houthis. As China's space footprint grows overseas, the likelihood increases that ostensibly civilian infrastructure could be used in ways that undermine U.S. and allied security.

- **Economic Competitiveness:** The global space economy is projected to reach $1.8 trillion by 2035, and China is securing early market share in developing countries through state-backed, bundled offerings. From 2005 to 2024, China won approximately $871 million in satellite contracts in Africa, more than three times the roughly $250 million secured by U.S. firms. Since 2010, China has launched 65 satellites for foreign customers, about 70 percent for developing countries. By contrast, only about 15 percent of foreign-owned satellites launched on U.S. rockets belong to Global South customers. These trends risk ceding emerging markets to China, mirroring its earlier dominance in global 5G infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Rebuild U.S. space engagement in the Global South** by restoring and updating programs like SERVIR that link NASA expertise to development efforts. Recent U.S.-Africa space training initiatives are a starting point but remain limited in scale.
- **Create targeted financing tools for space projects in developing countries**, using concessional loans or blended finance to support purchases from U.S. and allied providers.
- **Set aside limited U.S. commercial launch capacity for Global South partners**, including discounted rideshare opportunities, to reduce reliance on Chinese launch services.
- **Modernize export control rules** to enable greater overseas commercial activity by U.S. space firms, which industry has identified as critical to competing in emerging markets.

Additional Resources and Contact Information

Matthew P. Funaiole, Dana Kim, Brian Hart, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., "Eyes on the Skies China's Growing Space Footprint in South America," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 4, 2022, https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-ground-stations-space/.

Matthew P. Funaiole, Aidan Powers-Riggs, Brian Hart, Henry Ziemer, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Ryan C. Berg, and Christopher Hernandez-Roy, "Secret Signals: Decoding China's Intelligence Activities in Cuba," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 1, 2024, https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-cuba-spy-sigint/.

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