Space, the final frontier of global cooperation

Polarization hasn’t killed collaboration everywhere. Space shows how rivals can work together for good.

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Despite global fragmentation, there’s one area where international cooperation remains strong: aerospace missions. Space — with its strategic importance to security, communications and navigation for all the world’s economies and societies — demands continued cooperation and shared rules. And the issues are no longer confined to pure scientific inquiry but encompass national sovereignty and sustainability concerns, because unfortunately, space trash and orbital congestion are growing problems for everyone.

To address these issues, IESE Madrid hosted Aerospace Day in February 2026. **Juan Carlos Cortes**, director of the Spanish Space Agency (AEE); **Philip Baldwin**, assistant deputy associate administrator for NASA’s Space Communications and Navigation (SCaN) Program; and **Heriberto Saldivar,** head of strategy at the European Space Agency (ESA) took part in a panel moderated by IESE Prof. Joan Jané to discuss how geopolitical cooperation is not only still possible but alive and well.

Joan Jané: What changes have you seen in international space cooperation over the past 10 years?

Juan Carlos Cortes: Although cooperation is in the DNA of the space community because of the huge investments needed, it’s true we are witnessing a new era as world powers shift around two main poles — the United States and China — resulting in a concentration on national space programs.

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We're also seeing a growing number of satellites, which is creating congestion problems, particularly in certain low-Earth orbits and around the Poles, and we have to take care of sustainability of the space environment. We need to work together to update the 1967 Outer Space Treaty in order to safeguard space for future generations.

Heriberto Saldivar: Space used to be seen as a kind of adventure, but recently it has become clearer that space touches nearly every aspect of our lives — everything from telecommunications to banking depends on satellite-based positioning, navigation and timing (PNT) systems.

We've also seen a growing number of private companies entering space. Elon Musk's SpaceX recently applied to launch a million new satellites! It's becoming a very contested "empty" space, forcing us to think much more about frequencies and collisions in orbit.

Philip Baldwin: What has changed? Lots! Back in the 1990s, there was talk about commercializing space but the commercial industry wasn't ready. Now, with SpaceX, Blue Origin and others, it's a totally different ball game. From a NASA point of view, we want to leverage commercial industry: Let them do stuff like satellites and data centers, while we focus on pushing the next frontier.

The new geopolitical reality of space launches

JJ: To what extent do you think the Spanish Space Agency is prepared for the new reality?

JCC: The Spanish Space Agency was founded with the dual purpose of defense as well as promoting science, technology and innovation. I think this was a visionary decision. Working in alignment with the European Union's space security strategy requires us to cooperate at regional and international levels. At the same time, we are developing our own technologies to be independent in certain fields.

Strategic capabilities, like developing and launching our own communication satellites, have become nonnegotiable in a geopolitical context where autonomy is a priority. An example is the Atlantic Constellation to develop and launch eight Spanish satellites by 2027, which will provide data feeds for both maritime surveillance and land management for floods, wildfires, droughts and the like.

To launch satellites into orbit, we are working in partnership with PLD Space, a Spanish

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company developing reusable launchers. This is an example of a homegrown capability, along with Pangea Propulsion and Arkadia Space, to build an entire ecosystem of companies dealing with space mobility.

Juan Carlos Cortes: “Strategic capabilities, like developing and launching our own communication satellites, have become nonnegotiable in a geopolitical context where autonomy is a priority.” (Photo: Javier Arias)

JJ: How do you balance such national priorities with a shared European vision?

HS: It’s a long process. It starts by sitting down with our Member States and listening to them. Each has different priorities — the priorities of Spain are not the same as Finland’s — but there are areas where they overlap, and that is where we focus.

Launchers are one of our shared goals. You cannot be a space power if you cannot reach space. So this is one of our pillars: to secure autonomous, competitive access to space through new and potentially reusable transportation systems.

The Atlantic Constellation is another pillar: to develop the next generation of technologies in Earth observation for prediction and management of disasters.

The European Space Agency serves as a platform to empower Member States in pursuing these common goals, which we set out in ESA Strategy 2040. Member States invest in ESA, and under our geo-return policy, they receive back space industry contracts proportional to their contribution. Spain has done very well out of this, which is evidenced by how their space industry keeps growing and developing, in their launcher sector, for example.

Balancing priorities in a complex political environment

JJ: How is NASA balancing national vs. international priorities in this increasingly complex political environment?

PB: In terms of scientific exploration or cosmic discoveries, we share that openly. In 2025, we

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had some budget swings, challenging us to figure out which partnerships to prioritize. At the end of the day, strong international partnerships are key for us, and I think we can ride out the geopolitics.

There's a famous proverb: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. Obviously, if we're going to send humans the farthest we've ever gone before, we need to have partnerships to do this. Artemis II is a good example. To meet our objectives of sending crewed missions to the lunar base and after that going to Mars, we need teamwork, bringing various perspectives and capabilities across the board globally to make that possible.

One of the NASA space stations that's key to the Artemis program is located in Robledo de Chavela, near Madrid. That station gets the most data, and it's critical for all of our Artemis missions. In fact, one of the reasons I'm here in Spain is to strengthen these longstanding industrial cooperation agreements, which have been in place for more than 60 years and we want to ensure they continue. As of January 2026, 61 nations have signed the Artemis Accords, agreeing common principles governing exploration and the use of outer space.

Philip Baldwin: "Space remains the one thing that brings humanity together." (Photo: Javier Arias)

JJ: Why has space proven more resilient to geopolitical tensions than other sectors?

PB: Not to get too cliché here, but we all look up at the same sky at night, we see the stars, the moon and the planets, and we've been inspired by it ever since we were kids, and we carry that memory with us as adults. Space remains the one thing that brings humanity together. Everything about it breeds international cooperation and strong partnerships: coordinating frequencies has to happen globally; we have to collaborate to deal with orbital debris.

Of course, there are challenges, with budget cycles and the political side. On Earth, we have tensions and borders. But space is a wide open area, a place of wonder and discovery, and its exploration remains an inspiring force that still touches the heart of the world. We explore because we want to learn and use that learning here on Earth. That's where I think we can find common ground among nations. And that's something we should definitely continue to

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foster.

Cooperation on sustainability

JJ: You mention debris: One key area requiring cooperation is sustainability. With more satellites launched in just the last few years than during all six decades of space exploration, there is now a growing amount of debris orbiting Earth, with satellite or rocket parts regularly reentering our atmosphere without any control. How close are we to reaching agreement on space sustainability?

HS: The Zero Debris Charter is a good start. Though Europe initiated the process, the charter's supporters come from around the world, because it's an issue that affects everyone. If there's a collision between satellites from the U.S. and China, it's a problem for all our communications, not just those two nations'. We need worldwide legislation. Space is, by definition, a global activity, so we need a global legal framework.

It's worth noting that having a global legal framework is not only in everyone's interest; it can also be profitable. There are golden opportunities for a new space economy.

JCC: One of those opportunities comes from addressing the complete life cycle of the satellite, from the design, to the transport, to the launch, to the operation, to the reentry. When you talk about sustainability, you have to take a holistic view.

PB: Life cycle is one of the areas that NASA is looking at. For a number of years, we didn't require space assets to have controlled deorbit and propulsion in their descent. Now, with everyone launching into space, we're looking at how we can sustain everybody launching with no plan to deorbit or for reentry. We have to find ways to manage not only space traffic but the rules surrounding deorbit and reentry. That's new, and we're working to focus more energy there.

Another innovation area is reusable rockets. Before, we were just launching and launching, and not caring so much about reusability. Now, there has been a shift from making access to space cheaper, to also thinking about how not to pollute, how to deorbit and how to reuse things.

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Pooling our strengths for the sake of global humanity

JJ: Looking ahead, what's the greatest risk if international cooperation in space fails? Conversely, what's the greatest opportunity if we get it right?

PB: Take a parallel of what we do here on Earth with air traffic control: We do that well, and so now we can fly from one country to another fairly seamlessly. Or your cell phone: Years ago, when you went to another country, you'd have to get a new phone plan, but now it just works automatically. That background coordination, allowing things to just work seamlessly, is what we want for space. When there's an emergency, we want a global response to that, not just one person or one nation. And when we establish that ability to help one another and share technology, we advance humanity as a whole. We've experienced the benefits already over the past 60 years of space exploration — the innovation and technology leaps that have occurred because of it. Losing that would be tragic.

HS: The greatest opportunity is what's already happening with ESA as an international corporation. Space is too big, so we need to be able to pool all our strengths to achieve many more things together. The fragmentation and duplication of assets that we're starting to see pose risks to us solving problems that could be better solved through cooperation. Everybody always says that, from space, you don't see borders: I really think we need to embed that vision into how we see international space cooperation.

JCC: The opportunities are clear: to provide vital services in telecommunications and Earth observation for real-time application; and the future lunar economy, where the moon becomes an intermediate spaceport to explore the cosmos. We need to remember the historic docking between the American Apollo and Soviet Soyuz capsules in 1975, which helped dial down tensions between nuclear powers during the Cold War. That should serve to remind us of what's possible if we join forces and cooperate — and what's at stake if we don't.

SOURCE: Edited from a panel discussion at Aerospace Day held at IESE Madrid in February 2026. Recordings from IESE Aerospace Day can be accessed here. Organized in conjunction with the Aeronautics & Space Hub, initiated by IESE Alumni to serve as a meeting point for professionals linked to or interested in the aeronautics or space industry. To stay informed about and participate in upcoming activities and events, join the dedicated LinkedIn group.

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MORE INFO: IESE professors Alejandro Serrano and Philip Moscoso have written a business case study on "PLD Space" in collaboration with PLD CEO Ezequiel Sanchez. The case won an award from the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD Global) in the category of "Bringing Technology to Market."

The business case studies "Starship SpaceX: Scaling a first-principles system under pressure" and "Starship SpaceX: Disruption in the space value chain" by Joan Jané are both available from IESE Publishing.

This article is included in IESE Business School Insight online magazine No. 172 (May-Aug. 2026).

READ ALSO: Spain's first female astronaut Sara Garcia Alonso sees space as a lab for innovation

Stellar messages

- Space is now an essential strategic asset, not only for innovation and exploration, but for security, economic resilience and autonomy.
- In a context of geopolitical fragmentation and orbital congestion, cooperation isn't optional — it's a requirement for sustainability and security at the national, regional and global levels.
- The future of the space sector will depend on our ability to balance this cooperation.

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