the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences

Satellites for Peace: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

co-organized with Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), Kongsberg Satellite Services (KSAT), Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Satellite Centre (UNOSAT)

Overview

The global space industry—valued at $630 billion in 2023 and projected to reach $1.8 trillion by 2035—has rapidly expanded around the deployment of low-earth-orbit satellites. These systems now underpin essential civilian applications: scientific research, communications, navigation, and earth observation. Satellite imagery is indispensable for monitoring agriculture, climate, deforestation, water resources, urbanization, and poverty—capabilities central to food security, environmental stewardship, sustainable development, and effective aid delivery.

For fragile and conflict-affected areas, the role of satellites is even more crucial. Remote sensing provides accurate, timely information that ground personnel often cannot safely collect.

Satellites and the Global Architecture of Peace

High-resolution satellite imagery supports peace and humanitarian action by:

- Monitoring ceasefires and compliance with international humanitarian law
- Assessing damage to infrastructure, cultural, and religious sites
- Enabling early-warning systems and conflict forecasting
- Guiding crisis response teams across the UN system

- Supporting peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilization through precise assessments of housing, agriculture, utilities, and industry.

Both UNDP and UNOSAT view this conference as an opportunity to expand understanding of how satellite imagery strengthens peacebuilding and humanitarian action in fragile and conflict-affected areas.

A Timely Idea

The conference title echoes a 1979 *Washington Post* article inspired by Senator Adlai Stevenson, who envisioned satellites serving peace as well as human progress. Nearly fifty years later, this vision is no longer aspirational: global sharing of satellite imagery has advanced dramatically in reach, resolution, and analytical value.

Yet Very High Resolution (VHR) imagery (<50 cm) remains dominated by military demand, limiting access for humanitarian actors who urgently require these data to document crises, support vulnerable populations, and counter misinformation.

A recent PRIO report notes a record 61 armed conflicts in 36 countries in 2024. Effective humanitarian action now depends on reliable, high-resolution observations that only satellites can provide. Realizing this potential requires stronger cooperation among governments, the private sector, and the scientific community.

An Opportunity for Cooperation

In an increasingly polarized world, satellite data sharing offers a rare avenue for constructive, cross-bloc collaboration. UNOSAT already demonstrates the power of trusted, neutral institutions to distribute reliable information when misinformation proliferates during crises.

Expanding access to VHR imagery for humanitarian use would significantly enhance global capacity to respond to disasters and conflicts.

Conference Objectives

This conference pursues two main goals:

1. Assess the current state of satellite-based earth observation for humanitarian needs, including collection, analysis, and dissemination.
2. Explore ways to strengthen commitments—from States, international organizations, and private providers—to supply and fund VHR imagery for peace and humanitarian purposes.

Participants

The conference will convene experts in conflict analysis, crisis management, mediation, humanitarian assistance, science diplomacy, and space technology, alongside representatives from governments and the commercial space sector.