

# Open in Name Only: the OEWG on PAROS Stumbles Through its First Session

Recap of the First Session of the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) in all its aspects, 7-11 April 2025

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The first substantive session of the United Nations (UN) Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (PAROS) in all its aspects was intended to mark a turning point in space diplomacy, a chance for states to move beyond disagreements in approach between legal and nonlegal measures, and behaviours and weapons capabilities. It was to be the chance to begin meaningful work on a comprehensive approach to space security, arms control, and conflict prevention.

Instead, the week-long session became mired in the deep ruts of the past.

While some quiet progress was made behind closed doors, the public portion of the session ended with no agreed agenda and no formal program of work — despite five days of diplomacy and an overwhelming desire among most delegations to get down to business.

## **PAROS OEWG Overview**

The OEWG is established under UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution [79/512](#) and brings together two recent UN processes:

1. The 2022–2023 OEWG on Reducing Space Threats through norms, rules, and principles of responsible behaviours;
2. The 2023–2024 Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on further practical measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space.

The processes explored complementary approaches to PAROS:

- The OEWG emphasized responsible behaviour and norms, grounded in existing space and international law.
- The GGE focused on options for legally binding instruments to prohibit weapons and the use of force in space.

Instead of continuing these parallel tracks, this new OEWG merges both approaches into a single, comprehensive conversation. It is mandated to meet twice yearly for one-week sessions from 2025 through 2028. As decided during the scheduled organizational meeting in February 2025, the first substantive meeting of this process was held in Geneva from 7–11 April 2025.

## **What Happened: A Week in Procedural Limbo**

The session, scheduled as the OEWG’s first substantive meeting, immediately ran into trouble. The crux of the problem: no consensus on the provisional agenda. Though the draft had been circulated by the Chair — with carefully bracketed language noting points of disagreement — and reportedly reflected earlier procedural discussions and consultations, Russia objected to treating the meeting as substantive until all outstanding organizational matters had been resolved.

In Russia’s words: “We do not have anything” — no agreed agenda, no program of work, no rules for observer participation. Using the analogy of a wedding, Russia argued that the “bride” (agenda) wasn’t the one expected, and therefore the “wedding” (session) couldn’t

proceed. China echoed this position, suggesting that the working group “should fully reflect consensus of the international community” before moving forward.

Most other delegations disagreed. Germany responded curtly: “We shouldn’t waste time on anecdotes that don’t apply,” emphasizing that the OEWG was already operating under a clear UNGA mandate. Other states, including Canada, Mexico, and Switzerland, pointed out that the Chair had followed standard UN procedure by opening the session formally and planning to adopt both an agenda and program of work at the start.

### **Substance vs. Structure: A Procedural Chicken-and-Egg**

There are indications that some states also insisted that the agenda could not be adopted in isolation — it had to be accompanied by agreement on a program of work. These delegations linked the two procedural tools in a way that many delegations found illogical and obstructive.

Switzerland challenged this position directly, pointing out that it deviated from customary UN practice. It also pointed out that “the draft agenda indicates that the organization of work is to be addressed once the agenda is adopted.” Switzerland also urged a flexible approach to a program of work that would allow for adaptation as the discussion progresses.

In effect, the group was stuck in a procedural loop, unable to adopt an agenda without a program of work, but unable to define a program of work without first agreeing on the agenda.

### **Core Disagreements: What’s at Stake**

The procedural standstill reflected three core issues of disagreement:

1. **Inclusion of Norms of Behaviour** – The main sticking point on the provisional agenda was *Item 6*, which the Chair indicated was a reference to the balancing of the discussion of both legally binding and non-legally binding measures as mandated by the integrated approach of the OEWG. That at least one delegation appeared unwilling to formally include non-binding norms in the agenda was reflected in statements by, among others, Sweden, Brazil, Spain, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, South Africa, Republic of Korea, and Canada that suggested an inappropriate effort had been made by at least one state to selectively interpret the working group’s mandate. Japan argued that any attempt to alter the mandate from the General Assembly would create a “dangerous precedent” and should not be allowed.
2. **Comprehensive vs. Divided Structure** – A parallel debate related to the program of work emerged: should the group’s work proceed as a comprehensive discussion — as intended — or be divided into separate tracks for legal and normative issues? A bifurcation was widely rejected. Spain reminded delegations that the mandate was to consider both legal and normative approaches *together*, not separately. Singapore called the single-platform structure “vital,” warning that parallel processes would lead to fragmentation and inefficiencies.

Pakistan, while expressing a need for flexibility, emphasized that both legal and non-legal approaches must be addressed in a distinctive but integrated way, and that prioritizing one over the other would violate the holistic spirit of the OEWG. It is not clear if “distinctive” was intended as a reference to “separate.”

Together, these two concerns — what’s on the table? AND how is it to be discussed? — frame the fundamental disagreement. They must be resolved before the group can fulfill its promise to address PAROS “in all its aspects.”

3. **Observer Participation** – There was latent disagreement about the participation of nongovernmental and civil society actors. Many states supported inclusive engagement per the mandate of the General Assembly resolution, with Austria noting that beyond this mandate, existing rules regarding such participation during General Assembly meetings apply. However, Russia continued to indicate a “lack of consensus” on this matter.

### What Was Agreed? What Wasn’t?

Friday’s regrouping for a final public session indicated breakthroughs (✓) and barriers (✗) on the following issues:

- ✓ Preliminary consensus on agenda language, especially on once-contested Item 6, was *notionally* reached, but not formally adopted; Belarus noted that support came with “certain conditions attached.”
- ✓ Commitment to intersessional consultations emerged as a fallback plan. The Chair proposed closed-door negotiations before the July session to finalize the agenda and develop a consolidated draft program of work.
- ✓ Many states reaffirmed that discussions must cover both legally binding instruments and voluntary norms, doing so in a holistic, integrated manner rather than on two separate tracks, which at least one state seemed to be proposing. Austria and Australia were particularly vocal in opposing a divided approach.
- ✗ No agenda, formal or informal, was adopted.
- ✗ No program of work was established; agreeing to such a program now becomes the top priority for the July session.
- ✗ No agreement was reached on the modalities of nonstate and civil society participation.

### Reading between the Lines: Frustration, Diplomacy, and the Limits of Consensus

By Friday the general mood was clearly one of exasperation. As Germany noted, “Almost every other delegation was eager to begin substantive talks...but we can’t. Instead we are dragged into an unnecessary and painstaking exercise over the drafting of a simple agenda.” Brazil called the procedural impasse “unnecessary” and “dangerous,” warning that continued polarization would erode the progress embodied in the OEWG’s creation.

The Chair tried to strike an optimistic tone in closing: “If I have to say something positive...

we at least have a preliminary approval of the agenda and the hope of a draft program of work.” But nothing was certain.

There was a shared recognition that the July session cannot be lost to more procedural gridlock. South Africa, Canada, Pakistan, and others emphasized that threats to space security are not on pause, and diplomacy must keep up.

### **Looking Ahead: Can July Deliver?**

Despite the setbacks, some positive momentum may carry into the July session:

- A tentative compromise agenda exists;
- Intersessional consultations are planned;
- There’s overwhelming support by 174 UN member states for the OEWG’s inclusive, comprehensive, single-platform approach.

But for the group to fulfill its mandate to address *PAROS in all its aspects*, it will need more than procedural clarity; it will need compromise, flexibility, and genuine political will. As Switzerland put it: “The only value of this group is progress on substantive matters.”

Until then, the hope is that July will finally bring liftoff.

### **Additional Resources**

A formal recording and transcript of the session is available via the United Nations [here](#).

A [short guide](#) to the working group is available on the Project Ploughshares website.

Coverage of the discussion on both Twitter and Bluesky are available via @JessicaWestPhD

- Twitter: [Day 1](#)
- Twitter: [Day 5](#)
- Bluesky: [Day 5](#)



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