



Common but Differentiated Responsibilities for Space Debris Removal

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ABSTRACT

Expanding the concept of sustainability from Earth to outer space is a recent, yet inevitable development, which originates in the comprehension that the Earth's orbital space is a finite resource. The growing number of actors and operations in outer space have led to the proliferation of space debris, posing numerous risks to the long-term sustainability of space activities. Against this background, the *Guidelines for the Long-term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities* adopted by the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (UNCOPUOS) in 2019 call for enhanced international cooperation, effectively addressing such challenges. UNCOPUOS Member States agreed on the fact that international cooperation is required, however, what has not been agreed upon is the nature of such cooperation. The following paper elaborates on the concept of responsibility for space debris removal, looking for analogies in climate change law, namely the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR). Reviewing the literature on space debris regulations, this paper proposes a system based on the correlation between space activities of states and the responsibility for space debris removal. Acknowledging the principles of international space law and the *Guidelines for the Long-term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities*, key obstacles regarding space debris removal and recommendations strengthening international cooperation are discussed.

Introduction

Since the beginning of human space activity, Earth's orbital environment has been unregulated. Both defunct and operational satellites, together with upper stage rocket bodies have congested the Earth orbit. Since 1957 – the launch of Sputnik I – space debris, man-made objects uncontrollably congesting the Earth orbit, have posed threats to satellites, space flights and space missions. The International Space Station (ISS) has avoided multiple collisions. Space debris has become a heated topic due to several events: in 2007, China's ASAT missile destroyed the country's Fengyun-1C weather satellite, creating more than 3300 pieces of trackable and 150,000 pieces of small, untrackable orbital