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CHINA'S APPROACH TO SPACE DEBRIS ISSUES: POLICY AND LEGAL ASPECTS

Abstract

By outlining its space program for the next few years in the 2021 White Paper, China reiterates its commitment to heavily investing in space research and works towards its stronger space presence. As such, while charging ahead with sending thousands of more satellites to Earth orbits in the near future, China is clearly susceptible to a fast worsening space environment, including the challenges posed by space debris. The first part of this paper provides a historical overview of China's political and legislative efforts, at both domestic and international levels, to address space debris issues. The paper then, in its second part, examines the country's national policy and legal frameworks dealing with debris mitigation against the background of the relevant international initiatives. This is the mainstay of the paper in the sense that it explores China's domestic rules containing space debris mitigation requirements and is the starting point for possible revisions into the future. This part also generally notes that at this stage China does not have specific domestic norms for active removal of space debris. The third part takes a forward looking approach by referring to the recent international deliberations on debris mitigation and removal in the context of the UN's long term sustainability work. The author argues that it is in China's own interest to more actively engage in international negotiation on long term sustainability of outer space in a more constructive manner. In particular, in its 2021 White Paper, China undertakes to protect space environment and ensure space peaceful and clean. These commitments are in line with the current international rules upheld by other spacefaring nations. Hence, China can and should engage with other leading countries, including EU and the US, in setting up, for example, pilot bilateral mechanisms which can be used as the basis for a global framework. As the last part, conclusion remarks summarize some main points previously discussed in the paper while highlighting the common ground for China to cooperate and collaborate with other stakeholder nations in outer space.