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WASTE STUDIES' INSIGHT INTO ORBITAL DEBRIS: A UNITED ARAB EMIRATES CASE STUDY

Abstract

The proliferation of space junk, or orbital debris, is on track to develop into a tragedy of the commons. This debris poses a conundrum from the political perspective, as outer space is a domain of overlapping state powers (or no state powers, one could argue.) The growing presence of non-state actors in space adds to this complexity. Humans' ability to fathom the consequences of orbital debris is plagued by the same spatial and temporal biases that affect our understanding of waste on Earth. The field of Waste Studies—a discipline that assesses waste as a political material—offers valuable insight into the societal and individual behaviors which beget and sustain the proliferation of space junk. It further elucidates how waste can evolve into a diagnostic of a state's legitimacy, as the ability of a government to manage—or disappear—garbage is one measure of a government's efficacy. Chapter one of this paper draws insight from the discipline of waste studies to explore the political character of space junk. Chapter two serves as a primer on orbital debris, exploring the technical characteristics that help policymakers best understand the phenomenon. It also provides an overview of the legal landscape of orbital debris, identifying some of the key challenges that states face in addressing the problem. Chapter three builds off of this knowledge, applying the framework outlined in chapter one to a prominent emerging spacefaring nation: the United Arab Emirates. After describing the central geopolitical motivations of that nation's space program, the chapter explores the UAE's approach to space sustainability and its comments on orbital debris. By assessing the state's political goals in space with an emphasis on their approach to space sustainability, this chapter provides important insight to the future of the space sustainability agenda. The conclusion presents specific recommendations for U.S. policymakers, advising how they may best collaborate with the UAE and other emerging spacefaring nations to achieve a sustainable and prosperous space environment.