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AN ANALYSIS OF THE SPACE DEBRIS PROBLEM IN THE GEOSTATIONARY ORBIT

Abstract

Since the launch of Sputnik I in 1957, man's activities in outer space has grown exponentially. With technological advancement in the form of telecommunications outer space orbits play an integral part in our lives whether in the form of satellite television or Global Positioning System. However with current space technology almost every act of space exploration and use results in the dispersal of debris in the outer space environment. With the number of orbital debris growing alarmingly fast there is an immediate threat to commercial activities in space. The Geostationary Orbit is a limited and scarce natural resource with States debating and demanding coveted slots for a host of activities that can only be carried out in the geostationary orbit because of its unique physical nature. While space debris is a bigger problem in the Lower Earth Orbit currently, it is argued that the problem will aggravate in the geostationary orbit as well and will have worse effects on the allocation issue than the world currently faces since coveted slots might be taken up by debris in the form of defunct satellites and collisions. This paper analyses the existing international law with regard to effective management of space debris in the geostationary orbit. While there are a number of legal issues surrounding the geostationary orbit including military activities, use of nuclear power and the problem of allocation, this paper focuses mainly on the problem of orbital debris and touches upon the allocation issue very briefly to argue that the problem of debris will escalate the allocation issue. The paper also analyses whether direct regulations are more effective than other measures including taxation towards space debris mitigation.