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CHINA'S SPACE STATION PROJECT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION: FEASIBILITY
AND LEGAL ASPECTS

Abstract

China's manned space station project was officially initiated in September 2010. With the guidance of state-level manned space development strategy, Tiangong-1 was launched on September 29, 2011 and Tiangong-2 is scheduled to be launched in the coming 2016. According to the China National Space Administration (CNSA), China plans to establish its space station to be in orbit by 2020. This will enable China to become the third country that can independently construct and operate a space station. Meanwhile, the International Space Station (ISS) will probably retire in 2015, which creates an opportunity for and stimulates China to seek and conduct space cooperation internationally. This article examines the feasibility of different space cooperation modes between China and other countries, namely the China and ISS nations cooperation (Sino-ISS mode), the China and Russia or Japan cooperation (Bilateral mode), the China and APSCO nations cooperation (Regional multilateral mode), and the China-led global cooperation (Global multilateral mode), taking into account the following factors, China's current space policies and future legislation, national relations and principles of international cooperation and common interests of mankind. After exploring the advantages and limitations of the potential cooperation modes, this paper argues that due to the political, financial and technological reasons, it is unfeasible for China to carry out substantial cooperation in sub-regional and regional level. Instead, China-led international cooperation is the most ideal mode for China's space station project. Based on the above proposition, this paper also puts forward the most critical legal aspects of China's space station, i.e. the intellectual property, commercialization and dispute resolution mechanisms. In addition to complying with the current space law, by signing bilateral and multilateral agreements in terms of these specific legal issues, China's space station will achieve sound space cooperation.