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SPACE DEBRIS SYMPOSIUM (A6)
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ADOPTION OF THE MARITIME LAW SALVAGE PRINCIPLE FOR SPACE DEBRIS REMOVAL

Abstract

The huge increase in the number of space players in the past few decades has made outer space congested and hostile to both man and space objects. Despite all efforts to reduce space debris, its number keep increasing. The accidental collisions of Russia's Cosmos 2251 satellite with United States Iridium 33 in 2009, and that of the debris from Chinese Fengyun 1 C satellite with Russian Laser-ranging retro-reflector satellite in 2013 are practical examples of what damage, debris in outer space can cause. The 2013 movie titled "Gravity" imaginatively depicted and drew attention to the potential dangers that operational space objects and humans can face in outer space. The concern of the potential dangers of space debris and the security of valuable space objects and humans, has made the United States of America to State in its National Space Policy of 2010 that it "shall pursue research and development of technologies and techniques to mitigate and remove on-orbit debris, reduce hazards and increase understanding of the current and future debris environment." Other space-faring Nations too have taken the same bold steps in their policies. Although, the current strategies emphasize mostly on space debris mitigation as there are yet no practical methods of removal, most space-faring Nations are aiming at developing space vehicles for debris removal, while some are seeking companies to develop space debris removal mission. Hence, in the near future, the technology for removal will be developed beyond present anticipation. While the present legal regime does not cover this aspect of space debris removal activities, it is pertinent to adopt the maritime law principle of salvage in solving problems that would arise with the new technology. This work focuses on the adoption of the maritime law salvage principle for space debris removal. It describes briefly the debris situation of outer space, the present legal regime and the international efforts so far in solving the problem of space debris. It discusses the present efforts in developing technologies to remove debris from space, and the legal and political implication of this efforts. It gives an insight into the maritime law principle of salvage and its practical application in dealing with space debris removal. It concludes with some recommendations.