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THE U.N. REGISTRY OF SPACE OBJECTS: ITS ACCURACY, EFFECTIVENESS AND
EFFICIENCY AS NEW TECHNOLOGY AND NEW ACTORS EXPAND SPACE OPERATIONS

Abstract

The apparently simple and benign process of registering space objects as provided for in Article VIII of the Outer Space Treaty and further refined in the Registration Convention, is really quite complex and controversial. Registration raises numerous questions. They range from meeting its original purpose to its accuracy and efficacy in actual use due to recent technological advances such as the plethora of small satellites being launched, new on-orbit activities such as debris removal and satellite servicing, etc. This paper argues that the current U.N. registration system is so faulty that it is not able to fulfill its original purposes and that many of its objectives can now be accomplished in other ways. However, there are specific benefits to having and continuing the present registration system, and it has been useful in unforeseen ways: 1) creating a tool for international partnerships such as the ISS to parse ownership and responsibility among the partners, and 2) creating a regime of good will, good faith, and best practices among nations. This paper will address these problems and suggest that the U.N. registration system be improved. It will also argue that associated national requirements such as those found in Art. VI and Art. XII of the Outer Space Treaty should be better coordinated with registration and with overall national transparency in space activities. These efforts will become more important to questions of state responsibility, liability, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms as private spacecraft, private on-orbit operations, and other non- and quasi-governmental actors and activities expand in outer space.