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A GRADUAL APPROACH TOWARDS SPACE TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT

Abstract

The year of the 50th anniversary of the Outer Space Treaty witnesses ongoing discussions about the governance of space activities. The UNISPACE+50 process directly addresses relevant topics in this context, for example “the legal regime of outer space governance” or “space objects and events”. The latter directly relates to the sharing of information on space situational awareness data. In parallel to and interconnected with the UNISPACE+50 process, the Long-term sustainability working group of the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee (STSC) continues to discuss different guidelines that equally relate to governance issues, such as the registration of space objects and the management of the space environment. Also the Legal Subcommittee has relevant items on its agenda, notably those on international cooperation and non-legally binding. COPUOS member states also discuss the prospects of space traffic management in the LSC. In view of current need for increased safety and legal certainty in space, the development of a comprehensive and coherent set of rules governing space activities is indeed desirable. The creation of a genuine traffic management system necessitates extensive and long-lasting negotiations, most likely in the form of a global conference. Since there is currently no consensus for this “top down” approach, the alternative is to follow another path: A new legal regime can be prepared by the gradual build-up of elements of a future genuine traffic management regime. The proposed paper argues that 2018 can give a new impetus for such a “bottom up” towards space traffic management. Efforts for strengthening the existing UN space treaties should be reinforced – their substance should remain the foundation on which any new legal regime will be build. An increased information exchange on space objects is also part and parcel of a traffic management system. A better and more comprehensive registration practice can be a first step into this direction. Third, the findings of the working group on international cooperation can serve as a starting point for reflecting on the essential role that international cooperation will have to play for the management of the space environment, including through active debris removal. Fourth, the experiences of the working procedure of the Long-term sustainability working groups should be used to consider potential effective mechanisms and procedures for developing norms and standards relating to safety, sustainability and TCBM within COPUOS – thus following the example of other international organizations and regimes, such as ITU and ICAO.