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SPACE OBJECTS AS OCEAN'S WRECKS

Abstract

The return of a space object usually is a major achievement. Most of the time, it means that astronauts have safely returned to Earth and achieved their mission in outer space. However, the return of a space object might also consist in its uncontrolled fall to Earth. Launchers' stages, satellites and space stations have indeed fallen down on Earth, either willingly or involuntarily, in an uncontrolled way. As approximately seventy-one percent of Earth's surface is composed of seas and oceans, their trajectories mostly lead them to those unoccupied waters. The legal framework applying to the return of space objects into oceans consists both in international space law, through the Rescue Agreement and in international maritime law, through various international conventions. This article will focus on this particular topic, assessing the return of a space object in the oceans through a space law's perspective as well as through a more general law angle, including maritime law. The legal issues of the return of astronauts through the fall of an inhabited space object into the Atlantic Ocean, the fall down of entire parts of a space station into the Pacific Ocean or the crash of launchers' stages into the Arctic will be assessed.