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Norms and Standards for Safe and Responsible Behaviour in Space (3)

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WHAT IS A NORM OF RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR IN OUTER SPACE?

Abstract

This article aims to question the concept of norms of responsible behavior itself and explore the political implications of using this term as opposed to others. The term "norms" is widely used in both academic and political circles, but its interpretation can vary, leading to different understandings depending on the actors involved. While this ambiguity can sometimes aid in consensus-building, it can also present risks in the long run. It is worth noting that the notion of norms tends to be Western-centric, potentially leading to misunderstandings, particularly among emerging space-faring nations. This issue was evident during the latest open-ended working group on the reduction of space debris through norms, rules, and principles of responsible behavior (OEWG) within the United Nations. Several questions arise: What exactly does this notion encompass? What are the main criticisms it faces, such as its subjectivity and susceptibility to political contingencies? How can these tensions be resolved, and is there room for further exploration? Additionally, it's important to differentiate between norms, rules, principles, and transparency and confidence-building measures. The choice of the words are crucial and can significantly influence the global efforts of the space community to promote the dissemination of norms of responsible behavior. This paper aims to scrutinize the interpretations that certain states assign to this notion, revealing the diversity of understandings and acceptances surrounding it. Additionally, it will be valuable to leverage academic research to analyze the various definitions of norms. The failure of the international code of conduct in 2015 must be considered to identify what pitfalls to avoid in current endeavors. This paper seeks to provide recommendations to foster a shared understanding of norms of responsible behavior, even if this requires utilizing a different terminology. This contribution draws upon my participation in the 3rd session of the OEWG in February 2023 in Geneva, Switzerland.