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

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HAS THE TIME COME FOR A CHARTER OF BEST PRACTICES IN SPACE?

Abstract

Increasing space activities in a congested, contested, and competitive environment have been facing mounting challenges to guarantee the sustainability of space operations. Hence, is such accelerating deployment of space assets operated by a wide diversity of actors over a range of missions fit the existing framework established half a century ago, as well as more recent guidelines, to ensure that responsible behaviour in space is a respected common practice by every actor? Although legal, regulatory, and incentive tools, together with ground and space-based means have been implemented and proved their usefulness, it appears they will be insufficient to cope with the overwhelming space activity contemplated by the end of the decade, some pundits projecting about 100 000 satellites in LEO by 2030. This paper will summarise briefly the current tools regulating space activities, underlining their efficiency when space was “simple”, while progressively slowly weakening when dealing with a “complex” space to come. Therefore, it is suggested to develop a new transparency-based platform addressing the whole range of space activities based on a common acceptation of norms and best practices in space. Bearing in mind that i) space activities are increasingly interdependent – activities of some space operators can affect activities of other operators, and ii) the importance of a common understanding of transparency is key to this new endeavour. This collective entity would be opened to all space actors, public and private and would take the form of a Charter for ensuring best practices in space. The setting-up of the Charter would encompass the following elements: i) Designation of an entity in charge of a) the definition of best practices in space leading to adopt future rules for responsible behaviour in space; b) the establishment of collective rules for information exchange based on a common minimum corpus of (enhanced) transparency and trust measures, ii) Definition of mechanisms for operational maintenance / updates of the selected rules, iii) Adoption of applicable measures associated with deliberate non-compliance with the Charter, iv) Establishment of a list of exemptions to be accepted by all Charter’s members. A long-term objective would be to ensure that a non-adherence to the Charter becomes a handicap for exercising a space activity (e.g. the ITU can exercise its authority in this sense). The Charter would contribute as a building block conducive to the establishment of Space Traffic Management rules.