MODERN CHALLENGES IN SPACE LAW AND THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Dhruvi Sanghavi, BALLB, KES'S Shri Jayantilal H. Patel Law College, Mumbai

ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of space activities in the 21st century has changed outer space from a site for scientific exploration to a key area for commercial, technological, and strategic progress. International space law, mainly shaped by foundational treaties like the Outer Space Treaty, the Liability Convention, and the Registration Convention, offers the legal framework for activities beyond Earth's atmosphere. However, these treaties were created during a time focused on state interests and are increasingly unable to address recent changes, such as the rise of private space ventures, the increase in satellite launches, and complex liability issues. This paper looks at how space law has evolved and critically assesses how well existing legal principles regulate modern space activities. It claims that the current legal system has structural and enforcement weaknesses, especially concerning private involvement, accountability, and resolving disputes. The paper also explores India's role as a growing space power and underscores the need for robust domestic laws that meet international obligations.

1. *Introduction*

Space law is the body of law that regulates objects and activities beyond the Earth's atmosphere. Initially, it emerged as a subset of public international law, consisting primarily of treaties and soft law instruments that govern the conduct of state actors. Over time space law has expanded to encompass domestic laws and regulations enacted by national governments as well as private international law which governs relations among non state actors of different nationalities. Space law can be described as the body of law governing space related activities. Space law much like general international law comprises a variety of international agreements, treaties, conventions, and United Nations General Assembly resolutions as well as rules and regulations of international organizations. The term space law is most often associated with the rules, principles and standards of international law appearing in the five international treaties and five sets of principles governing outer space which have been developed under the auspices of the United Nations. Outer space has shifted from limited scientific exploration to a complex and competitive space with various state and non state players. The creation of international space law began in the mid 20th century when the launch of artificial satellites made it necessary to develop legal standards for activities beyond national boundaries. The Outer Space Treaty set fundamental principles like non appropriation, peaceful use, and state responsibility. The rising involvement of private companies and the growth of satellite networks have shown significant gaps in regulation and oversight. Space law encompasses the legal framework governing activities conducted beyond Earth's atmosphere. It comprises a collection of international agreements, treaties, conventions, and resolutions established by organizations like the United Nations, alongside regulations set by individual nations.[1]

2. *Evolution of Space Law*

2.1 Origins in the Cold War Era

Space law started during the Cold War, a time defined by political competition between major powers. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 marked the dawn of the space age and raised worries about the use of outer space for military ends. In response, the United Nations formed the

[1] United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), International Space Law
Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India, freeland, Steven & Jakhu, Ram S., The Law of Space Activities: An Introduction (2017), Georgetown university

Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) in 1959.

2.2 Development of Legal Principles

Early legal principles aimed to ensure that outer space remained open and free from national control. These principles were later included in binding international treaties. However they were mainly crafted for state-led efforts and lack the detail needed for today's scenarios.

2.3 Transition to Commercialization

In the last few decades, space activities have changed dramatically due to commercialization. Private companies now significantly contribute to satellite launches and related services. This shift has led to new legal challenges, especially in areas like liability, regulation, and accountability.[2]

3. *Major Space Treaties and Legal Framework*

3.1 The Outer Space Treaty (1967)

The Outer Space Treaty is the foundation of international space law. It states that outer space is the domain of all humanity and bans national ownership. It also holds states accountable for all activities in space including those conducted by private companies.

3.2 The Liability Convention (1972)

The Liability Convention outlines rules for damage caused by space objects. It establishes absolute liability for damage on Earth and fault based liability for damage in space. However proving fault in practice limits its effectiveness.

3.3 The Registration Convention (1976)

The Registration Convention requires states to keep a registry of space objects and share this information with the United Nations. This promotes transparency but lacks enforcement mechanisms.

[2] United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), International Space Law
Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India

3.4 The Moon Agreement (1979)

The Moon Agreement stresses the idea of the common heritage of mankind. However its limited number of ratifications reduces its practical impact.[3]

4. *Core Legal Principles of Space Law*

Fundamental principles include non-appropriation, freedom of exploration, peaceful use, international responsibility and liability. While these principles offer a strong framework, they lack clear implementation mechanisms and enforcement options.[4]

5. *Legal Challenges in Contemporary Space Activities*

5.1 Space Debris and Operational Risks

Growing numbers of satellites have created congestion in orbital space. Space debris poses risks to operational satellites and raises legal questions about responsibility and accountability.

5.2 Rise of Private Space Actors

Private companies play a crucial role in space ventures now. Under current law states remain responsible for these activities which creates a gap in direct accountability.

5.3 Limitations of Liability Framework

The liability system is hard to enforce when multiple actors are involved. The lack of effective dispute resolution mechanisms makes enforcement even more complicated.

5.4 Militarization and Security Concerns

Although the Outer Space Treaty bans weapons of mass destruction, it does not fully regulate

[3] United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), International Space Law
Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India
Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, Including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies art. I, Jan. 27, 1967, 610 U.N.T.S. 20
Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects
Convention on Registration of Objects Launched into Outer Space
Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies, 1979
[4] Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India

military operations in space leading to legal uncertainty.[5]

6. Space Legislation in India

India's current legal framework governing space exploration remains relatively underdeveloped. Although instruments such as the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Act, 1969 and the National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC) Guidelines, 2011 exist, they provide only limited oversight of space-related activities.

At present, India's space governance is largely based on policy measures rather than a unified legislative framework. These include:

(a) ISRO Technology Transfer Policy**:** Intended to encourage private sector participation, this policy facilitates the outsourcing of satellite component manufacturing and other space technologies to domestic and international firms, allowing ISRO to concentrate more on research and innovation.

(b) Remote Sensing Data Policy, 2011**:** This policy permits the distribution of high resolution remote sensing data for private purposes except for sensitive information with the aim of supporting developmental applications.

(c) Satellite Communication Policy, 1997 (SATCOM): This policy was introduced to promote satellite communication, enhance launch capabilities, and attract private investment. However its limitations led to the development of additional norms and procedural guidelines.

(d) Indian Space Policy (ISP) 2023: This policy makes the Department of Space's role simpler, supports private companies in launch, ground stations, and data services, and sets IN-SPACe as the single agency for approvals.[6]

7. *India's Role and Legal Challenges*

India has become a notable spacefaring nation thanks to the consistent efforts of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). In recent decades India has shown significant technological capabilities through satellite launches, interplanetary missions, and affordable

[5] U.N. Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines (2007)
[6] Drishti IAS blog.

launch systems. Its approach to space activities balances scientific progress, strategic interests, and increasing commercialization.

a. India as an Emerging Space Power

India's involvement in international space law is clear as it is a signatory to major space treaties, including the Outer Space Treaty, Liability Convention, and Registration Convention. This shows its intent to follow established international norms. ISRO's successes, like the Mars Orbiter Mission (Mangalyaan) and Chandrayaan missions, demonstrate India's growing role in global space exploration. Furthermore, India has built reliable launch vehicles including PSLV and GSLV making it a competitive player in the commercial satellite launch sector.

b. Increasing Role of Private Sector

India is gradually opening its space sector to private companies with initiatives like IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre). This shift moves from a purely state controlled model to one that includes both public and private players. However this change brings legal complexities, especially concerning regulation, licensing, and oversight of private companies.

c. Absence of Comprehensive National Space Law

One major challenge is the lack of comprehensive national space legislation. Although a Draft Space Activities Bill exists it has not been passed into law. This creates uncertainty in areas such as:

1. Liability and insurance rules for private companies

2. Authorization and oversight mechanisms

3. Compliance with international obligations

d. Liability and Accountability Issues

Under international law, India is responsible for all national space activities including those done by private companies. This creates a legal gap as private actors are not directly liable at the international level. Without domestic laws it becomes tough to determine how liability will

be divided between the state and private parties.

e. Regulatory and Institutional Challenges

India faces difficulties in establishing a solid regulatory framework to manage increasing space activities. Key issues include:

1. Lack of clear licensing processes

2. Absence of detailed compliance standards

3. Coordination among various regulatory bodies

f. Strategic and Security Concerns

India's growing space capabilities also present strategic issues, especially concerning national security and defence. Actions like anti-satellite (ASAT) tests reveal the need for clear legal standards governing such operations. Overall India's situation highlights both opportunities and challenges, stressing the need for a robust domestic legal framework that aligns with international law.[7]

8. *Reforms and Recommendations*

The rapid changes in space activities require important reforms in both international and national legal systems. The current framework, while foundational, is not enough to handle modern complexities.

a. Strengthening International Legal Framework

There is a need to create updated international agreements that tackle current issues like private involvement, orbital crowding, and dispute resolution. Existing treaties should be enhanced with more precise and binding provisions.

b. Regulation of Private Actors

Clear laws must be set up to regulate private companies involved in space activities. This

[7] Government of India, Department of Space, Draft Space Activities Bill (2017), Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India, Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO)

includes:

1. Mandatory licensing systems

2. Compliance and monitoring processes

3. Defined liability and insurance rules

4. These measures will help ensure accountability and lessen legal confusion.

c. Reform of Liability Regime

The current liability system needs to change to address difficulties in situations where many actors are involved. This includes:

1. Clarifying standards for fault based liability

2. Creating mechanisms for resolving disputes

3. Introducing clearer rules for compensation and claims

d. Development of National Space Laws

Countries including India need to adopt comprehensive domestic laws that govern space activities. National laws should:

1. Align with international obligations

2. Regulate private sector involvement

3. Provide clear enforcement mechanisms

e. Institutional Strengthening

Governments should create specialized regulatory bodies to oversee space activities. These organizations can ensure effective law implementation, monitoring, and compliance.

f. Enhancing International Cooperation

Space activities call for a cooperative approach due to their global nature. Increased

collaboration among nations can aid in information sharing, dispute resolution, and maintaining stability in outer space.[8]

9. *Conclusion*

The laws that govern space have been important in making sure that space activities develop in an orderly way since the mid twentieth century. Key treaties like the Outer Space Treaty set out principles that still guide how countries behave. However the fast changes in space activities with more private companies and new technologies have shown that the current laws have big gaps. The fact that current laws focus on countries and do not have enforcement mechanisms means they are not good enough to deal with today's challenges. India's growing role in space makes it more important to have strong domestic laws that match international rules. Not having a complete national framework creates uncertainty especially when it comes to companies and who is responsible if something goes wrong. To make sure that space is governed well the laws need to change to reflect what is happening now. This means making international agreements stronger changing how responsibility is determined and having national rules. An organized and flexible legal system will be crucial for keeping order making sure people are accountable and having long term stability in outer space.[9]

[8] Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO)
Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India
[9] Drishti IAS, Need for a National Space Law in India
United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA), International Space Law

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