

Speech by SJ at 2026 Colloquium on International Law (English only)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Paul Lam, SC, at the 2026 Colloquium on International Law today (July 3):

Dr Neoh (Chairman of the Asian Academy of International Law, Dr Anthony Neoh), Deputy Commissioner Zhang (Deputy Commissioner of the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Mr Zhang Changwei), Professor Cheng (Secretary-General of the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed), Professor Teresa Cheng), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. On behalf of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR), it is my great pleasure to welcome you all today, with a special welcome to our guests who have travelled from overseas.

For most of us in Hong Kong, "outer space" long felt like a distant concept. Apart from the Chinese folklore associated with the moon during celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival and some science fiction movies, outer space used to be considered as far beyond us and disconnected from our real day-to-day lives here in this bustling commercial city.

But more recently, outer space is no longer a too distant concept for us in Hong Kong. Today, Hong Kong feels a profound sense of pride: our city's first astronaut is currently aboard China's Tiangong Space Station, as a payload specialist in the crew of the Shenzhou-23 mission. This milestone has fundamentally shifted our perspective. We realised that outer space is not as far away or irrelevant to us as we might believe. Knowing that one of our fellow citizens is looking down on us from orbit makes the space economy real, tangible, and directly relevant to our future, including the creation of a new vision to the next generation and the generations to come.

A personal reflection on space law

I would also like to share with you my own transition from viewing space as a fantasy to understanding it as a legal domain began during my legal studies. In the early 1990s, while pursuing my LL.M. in international law, one of the subjects that I studied was space law. I still vividly recall studying the leading text by Professor Bin Cheng, *Studies in International Space Law*, and I still have some vague recollections about the Moon Treaty discussed in a dedicated chapter in the book.

At that time, my interest in the subject was purely academic. I remember wondering how many lawyers in Hong Kong would ever actually need to engage space law in their practice, say, to litigate a dispute over a lunar base.

Today, I am genuinely glad to be proved wrong. Nowadays, space law has matured into a discipline of much greater practical significance. International space law is no longer a collection of theoretical principles for a distant future - we may well be arbitrating satellite collisions, licensing lunar landings, and debating resource rights for asteroid mining in our day-to-day lives. The subject has become imminent, asking for literally down-to-earth solutions.

The national mandate: the 15th Five-Year Plan

This imminent need is also recognised at the highest level of national policy. The development of outer space across scientific, commercial, and strategic domains is explicitly highlighted in China's 15th Five-Year Plan. As an integral part of China, Hong Kong has both the opportunity and responsibility to contribute its unique strengths to this great endeavour.

The question is no longer "if" Hong Kong should participate, but "how". In this regard, I can see three distinct avenues where Hong Kong can make a real impact.

(a) Aerospace science and engineering

First, we may begin with our strength in science and aerospace engineering. Hong Kong's universities are no longer just teaching aerospace theory, they are designing and manufacturing hardware that goes into orbit. Local research institutions are conducting cutting-edge work on space-bound devices for telecommunications, earth observation, and life sciences.

In fact, Dr Lai Ka-ying, our Hong Kong astronaut, is tasked with operating the city's first scientific payload developed by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology on the Tiangong Space Station. The Multi-Spectral Imaging Carbon Observatory, or the MUSICO, is the world's first lightweight, high-resolution, high-precision synergistic carbon dioxide and methane point-source detector. This is a matter of immense pride and proof that Hong Kong's innovative capabilities can deliver under the demanding conditions of space. We must continue to back these frontier scientific research in space.

(b) Professional services for commercial space activities

The second avenue leverages Hong Kong's sharpest competitive edge on professional services. As the global space sector transitions from state-led exploration to commercial exploitation, we are seeing a surge in private satellites, space tourism, and off-world mining. These activities require robust financial, legal, and risk-management frameworks.

Launching a commercial satellite requires far more than rocket fuel. It demands massive capital investment, complex contracts for payload integration and spectrum rights, specialised insurance to underwrite the risks of launch failure or orbital collision,

as well as collaborative orderly regulation among states. The modern satellite industry also involves a complex web of system operators, manufacturers, launch providers, and insurers. Their relationships are governed by a dense network of procurement contracts, launch agreements, insurance policies, and leasing arrangements. International agreements may also come into play as well. For example, the 1972 Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Objects, which is applicable to the HKSAR, governs matters of compensation for damages caused by launching a State's space object, for which legal and other professional services may also be required to determine the issue of liability and the amount of compensation.

Furthermore, dispute resolution services will also be required to resolve any dispute in relation to the above. As a leading international arbitration centre, Hong Kong is exceptionally well-positioned to resolve these disputes. Thanks to the principle of "one country, two systems", our common law system, independent judiciary, and multilingual pool of experts make us an ideal venue. Arbitration is suited to the space industry for several reasons:

- (i) Neutrality and flexibility: It offers parties a voluntary, customisable process.
- (ii) Enforceability: It results in final, binding awards enforceable in over 170 jurisdictions under the New York Convention.
- (iii) Specialisation: Procedures can be tailored specifically to the sector. For instance, the Permanent Court of Arbitration's optional rules for outer space disputes provide for specialised panels with technical expertise and strict confidentiality regimes to protect trade secrets.

Apart from international arbitration, such disputes may also be resolved through international mediation. The IOMed, as headquartered in Hong Kong, is the world's first intergovernmental organisation dedicated exclusively to international mediation and can surely handle such inter-State space-related disputes for amicable resolution.

(c) Capacity-building

Thirdly, in addition to being a leading dispute resolution hub, Hong Kong serves as a vital centre for capacity building and the exchange of legal expertise on both doctrinal studies and practical application of space law. In this connection, the Hong Kong International Legal Talents Training Academy launched by the Department of Justice in 2024 has played a pivotal role in hosting international scholars, training officials in different areas of laws including space law, and advancing awareness among practitioners.

We also welcome collaboration with other leading institutions like the Asian Academy of International Law and international organisations such as IOMed, the Hague Conference on Private International Law - Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific and the Asian African Legal Consultative Organization Hong Kong Regional Arbitration

Centre, whose presence in Hong Kong could create synergy for capacity building in tackling complex, cross-border and other emerging challenges confronted by the space industry.

Lastly, I would like to highlight that as part of China, the Government of the HKSAR is deeply committed to supporting a stable, rule-based legal order for outer space to facilitate its peaceful use for all in an equitable manner. At the same time, creating new opportunities in space law, finance, and technology allows us to generate high-quality jobs, attract premier global talent, which will also contribute to the long-term prosperity of Hong Kong. Let's continue our collaboration and work together.

On this note, I wish you all a fruitful forum today and for those coming from overseas a memorable and enjoyable stay in Hong Kong. Thank you.

Ends/Friday, July 3, 2026