

As a first task, the Conference will undertake an in-depth review of the existing law of the sea so as to harmonize it with the new uses that are made of ocean space. Ever since the 17th century, the principle of the freedom of the seas reflecting the commercial, colonial and naval interests of the major maritime powers of that period, has prevailed. This was a satisfactory basis for world order so long as the ocean space was used mainly for navigation and fishing and in ways which were intrinsically harmless to the marine environment, to the living resources of the sea or to other states.

As of late, however, this principle has been challenged as the development of technology has made possible new, more intensive utilizations of the oceans.

Sophisticated fishing gear now enables fishing vessels to catch their prey with relative ease but it may also cause over-fishing of stocks to virtual extinction.

Modern technology will soon allow the commercial exploitation of the mineral resources (i.e. the manganese nodules) of the deep seabed beyond the limits of national jurisdiction. These resources are likely to benefit only the small number of countries that have the necessary advanced technology unless a new regime is devised which takes into account the needs of mankind as a whole and of developing countries in particular.

The proliferation of oil tankers, both large and small, is increasing the risks of damage to areas where navigation is intensive, such as international straits and other sensitive areas close to the shores of coastal states where many communities are dependent on the resources of the sea.

While scientific research in the marine environment must be encouraged, it may, without appropriate control, open the door to abuses which might have undesirable consequences for the security and economic interests of coastal states.

It is, therefore, imperative for the forthcoming conference to elaborate a series of rules aimed at preventing these abuses.