Surveying submarine cable routes: international law issues

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Workshop on submarine cables and law of the sea,
Singapore 14-15 December 2009
Session 2: Surveying cable routes and laying cables
Overview

• Preliminary remark on applicable law
• Areas under coastal State sovereignty: maritime internal waters, archipelagic waters and territorial sea
• Areas within functional coastal State jurisdiction: EEZ and continental shelf
• Areas beyond coastal State jurisdiction
Preliminary remarks

- Sources of the law: UNCLOS 1982 and customary international law; on submarine cables largely coincide?
- UNCLOS provisions need interpretation; some “constructive ambiguity” included, and developments continue requiring evolving interpretations
- Interpretation of UNCLOS: subsequent practice important
Areas under coastal State sovereignty

- Full coastal State authority over cables: laying, maintenance and operation, including cable route surveying
- Surveying activities are explicitly mentioned as not covered by the right of innocent passage: art. 19(2)(j) UNCLOS (plus art. 21(1)(g))
- Straits: art. 40; archipelagic waters: art. 54
- Coastal State prior permission required: discretionary powers / conditions
Areas under coastal State functional jurisdiction

- EEZ (200M) and CS (200M plus beyond)
- Contiguous zone (24M): not relevant
- EEZ: art. 58, CS: art. 79: freedom of laying transit submarine cables (cf paragraph 4 of art. 79)
- Surveying of route for transit cables is part of freedom (art. 58, paragraph 1)
Surveying is not MSR

- Surveying, including hydrographic surveying, is an activity not covered by the concept of marine scientific research (MSR) as used in UNCLOS
- No definition of MSR: in principle broad notion, but certain activities potentially covered were excluded by specific regulation in UNCLOS: resource exploration, (hydrographic) surveying
Areas beyond national jurisdiction

- Artt. 87 and 112 UNCLOS: freedom to lay submarine cables beyond the continental shelf
- Includes freedom to survey cable routes