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The Euro-American Space Collaboration in a Multipolar World: Partnership and Autonomy

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Abstract:

The contemporary landscape of space exploration and utilization is characterized by an increasingly multipolar world order, with an array of nations and organizations vying for influence, resources, and technological advancements. Amidst this complex backdrop, Euro-American collaboration in space endeavours has become a focal point of attention. The Euro-American collaboration in space encompasses a rich history of achievements, with these cooperative efforts underscoring the value of pooling resources, expertise, and funding for ambitious space projects. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape has compelled both Europe and the United States to consider the extent to which they rely on one another for space access, technology, and policy decisions.

Keywords:

Space, security, multipolar world, transatlantic relationship

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I. Space as a reflection of Terran politics

Throughout the history of space exploration, the trajectory of space endeavours has been intrinsically linked to Earth geopolitics. Geopolitical considerations, power struggles, and national interests have consistently shaped the goals, strategies, and outcomes of space activities[1]. Perhaps one of the most emblematic chapters in this narrative is the so-called Cold War Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Fuelled by political rivalry, this era witnessed a fervent competition to achieve milestones that would symbolize technological and ideological superiority[2]. From the launch of Sputnik 1 to the historic Apollo Moon landings, each achievement in space was a geopolitical statement, demonstrating the prowess and capabilities of the respective superpowers.

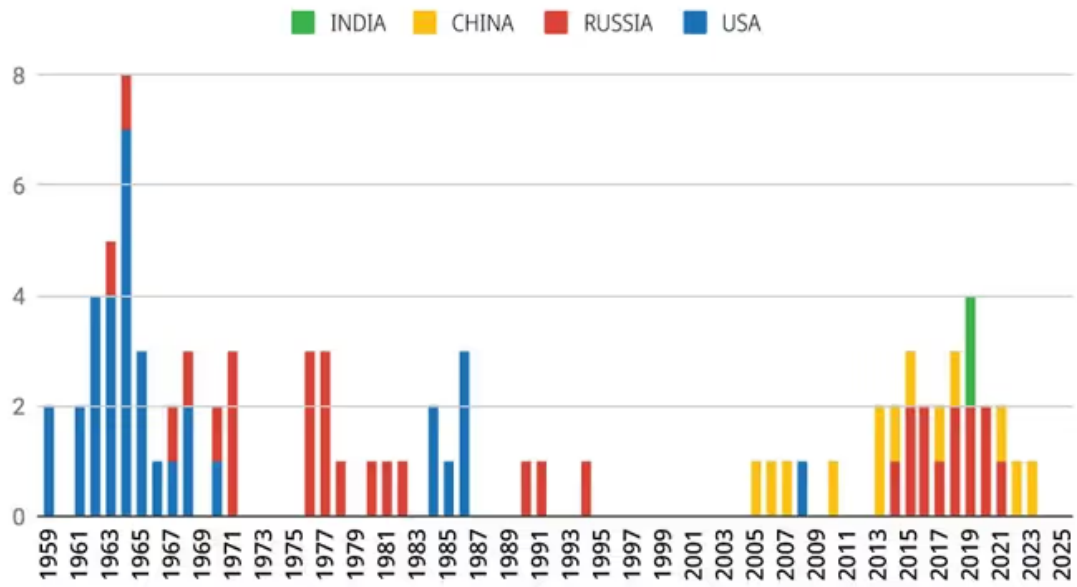
The Outer Space Treaty of 1967, a pivotal document in the history of space law, serves as a reflection of this intense political space race. Drafted during this period of heightened geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the treaty emerged as a response to the potential weaponization of space and the competitive atmosphere of the space race[3]. After the creation of this treaty, and particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the political aspect of space operations shifted mostly towards scientific collaboration and joint initiatives, albeit space continued to retain a significant military component[4].

However, an increasing number of scholars have theorised that the world seems to be moving towards a Great Power Competition geopolitical dynamic in the last decade[5][6][7]. Great Power Competition (GPC) refers to a geopolitical state where multiple nations with significant military, economic, and political power compete with each other for influence and advantage. It is typically characterized by tensions, rivalries, and potential for conflict between the great powers, as they seek to promote their own interests and influence in

[1] Bowen, B.E., 2022. Original Sin: Power, Technology and War in Outer Space. Hurst Publishers.
[2] Erickson, A.S., 2018. Revisiting the US-Soviet space race: Comparing two systems in their competition to land a man on the moon. Acta Astronautica, 148, pp.376-384.
[3] United Nations Treaties, 1967 Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies
[4] Mowthorpe, M., 2004. The militarization and weaponization of space. Lexington Books.
[5] Jones, B., 2020. China and the return of great power strategic competition. Brookings Institution.
[6] Kikuchi, S. and Arakaki, H., 2017. The United States: addressing the return to great power competition. East Asian Strategic Review.
[7] Brands, H., 2017, September. Six Propositions about Great-Power Competition and Revisionism in the 21st Century. In The Future of the Global Order Colloquium.

global affairs[8]. If true, this transition towards a multipolar global order may exert a notable influence on the security of space assets[9], primarily characterized by heightened competition and an augmented likelihood of orbital incidents. Such a shift raises apprehensions regarding the safeguarding of space assets, along with the potential for disruptions to space-based services, encompassing satellite-based communication and navigation.

Under the worst-case scenario, this competition has the potential to progress into a hybrid or overt conflict, wherein speculative nations may endeavour to diminish their rivals' capabilities by targeting their space infrastructure. To execute such strategies, adversaries might employ Anti-Satellite weapons (ASAT), with the intent of destroying or impairing the space assets of their competitors[10].



Graph 1: ASAT Tests by year, Secure World Foundation

As evident in Graph 1, these tests were conducted exclusively by the two predominant nations during the Cold War era, namely the USA and the USSR. However, there has been a resurgence in the frequency of such tests over the past decade, featuring the

[8] O'Rourke, R., (2022), February. Renewed great power competition: implications for defence-issues for congress. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS WASHINGTON DC

[9] Moltz, J.C., (2019). The changing dynamics of twenty-first-century space power. Journal of Strategic Security, 12(1), pp.15-43.

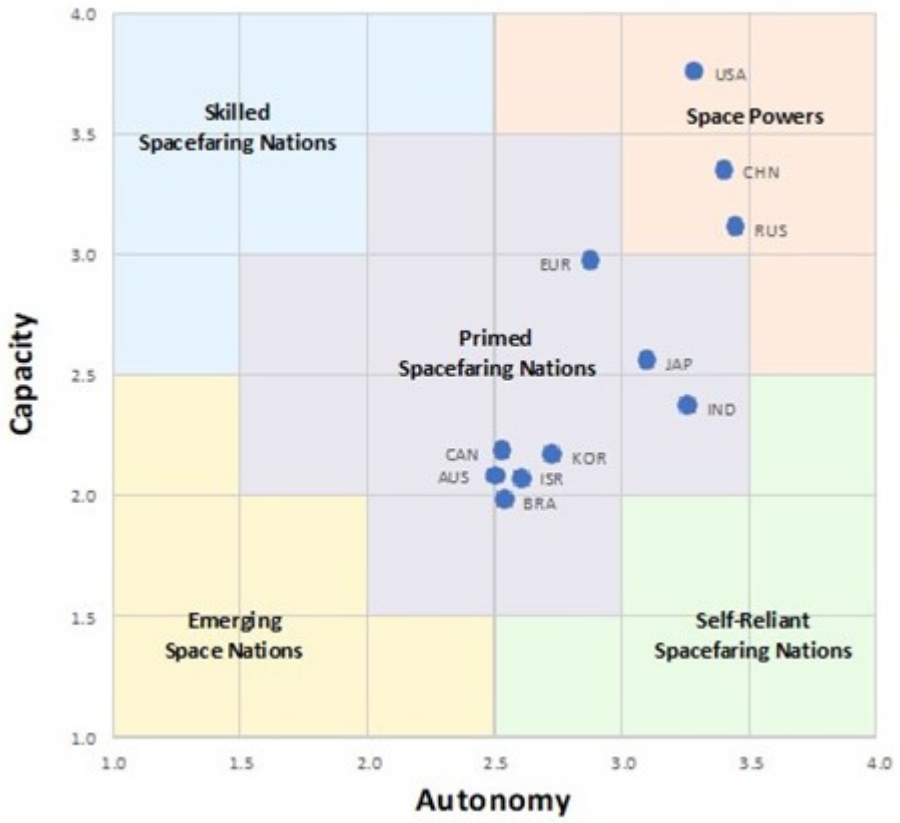
[10] Samson, V. and Cesari, L., (2025). 2025 Global Counterspace Capabilities Report, Secure World Foundation. https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/2025-global-counterspace-capabilities-report

involvement of emerging space-capable nations, aligning with the prospect of a return to a Great Power Competition (GPC) dynamic. These tests serve two primary objectives: firstly, to assess a nation's proficiency in effectively incapacitating a space asset, and secondly, to demonstrate the acquisition of this capability to potential adversaries.

The increasing frequency of ASAT tests, as outlined in the provided context, is intricately linked to a nation's spacefaring capabilities. In the current geopolitical landscape, where there seems to be a shift towards Great Power Competition (GPC), space capabilities are regarded as critical components of military and strategic prowess. The ability to conduct successful ASAT tests directly correlates with a nation's advancements in space technology and its capacity to project power beyond Earth.

However, the status of space power should not solely be asserted based on metrics like market share, launch frequency, the quantity of active satellites, or the ability to conduct Anti-Satellite (ASAT) tests. Rather, a true space power should be recognized as an entity equipped with the capacity to independently deploy, operate, and derive benefits from any space-related capability. This capacity should be aligned with autonomous determinations to support national objectives. In regards to this, in the book “Power, State and Space” the authors provide a detailed framework to evaluate space faring capabilities of nations. As illustrated in the matrix below[11], the status of space power is distinct, exclusively granted to states that possess a defined level of space power marked by a significant degree of autonomy and robust capability convergence.

[11] Aliberti, M., Cappelli, O. and Praino, R., 2023. Power, State and Space: Conceptualizing, Measuring and Comparing Space Actors.



Graph 2: Space Power Matrix, "Power, State and Space"

Capacity measurement encompasses a broad evaluation of a state's ability to implement space-related strategies for the achievement of economic, political, or societal goals. This evaluation involves both hard and soft dimensions. The hard capacity index focuses on assessing material assets and capabilities enabling an actor to engage in space operations comprehensively. Conversely, the soft capacity index aims to gauge the state's effectiveness in utilizing and integrating assets and expertise within national policies, infrastructure, and activities. To capture shifts in the overall distribution of capacity, two indices are employed and eventually combined into a single capacity index. This comprehensive capacity value is then utilized to position a country or region within the main matrix of space power.

Autonomy, on the other hand, pertains to a state's self-reliance in setting directions, defining policies, and operating within the space realm using its own strengths and resources. Autonomy encompasses technical and political dimensions, each measured

through specific indices. The technical autonomy index evaluates the extent to which a state can access and operate in space without depending on external sources. Simultaneously, the political autonomy index assesses the state's capacity to formulate independent interests, irrespective of or in opposition to various political and societal influences originating both within and outside the country.

Within the illustrated graph, the hierarchy of consolidated space powers is distinctly arranged, with the United States, China, and Russia securing the top positions in order of prominence. These nations stand out as the primary drivers of space capabilities, demonstrating a significant confluence of both hard and soft dimensions in the assessment of capacity and autonomy. Beyond these primary players, the European bloc, along with Japan and India, emerge as the next tier of influential spacefaring nations. The situation of Europe is particular in the analysis, being not a nation state but rather a confederation of countries within the EU plus members of other organizations like ESA. This translates, as the graph showcases, in a considerable technical capacity but a contrasting lower autonomy, due mainly to a lack of political unity, particularly in terms of foreign policy.

This capacity and autonomy framework aligns with various international relations theoretical perspectives[12]. Realist theories would recognize the importance of hard capacity, acknowledging that a nation's material assets and capabilities in space directly contribute to its strategic advantage and influence in the international system. The ability to operate across the spectrum of space capabilities is seen as essential for asserting power and securing national interests.

Liberal theories, on the other hand, could find resonance in the soft capacity index. The effective utilization and integration of space assets and expertise in national policies, infrastructure, and activities reflect a nation's capacity for cooperation and collaboration. Soft capacity is crucial in fostering international partnerships and alliances, contributing to a more interconnected and cooperative global space community. A state's autonomy in space is not merely about technical capabilities but also about asserting its political will and defining its unique interests within the international community.

[12] Singh, D., 2023. Main International Relations Theories. In The Tripartite Realist War: Analysing Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (pp. 7-65). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Furthermore, a hybrid approach to space power could take place as well[13], mixing different aspects from a variety of international relations theories, recognizing the interplay of competition, collaboration, and identity formation in shaping the contemporary global landscape of space capabilities.

Space cooperation, particularly involving security and defence areas, its heavily influenced by the global geopolitical context and countries actions in space can be analysed, to a considerable degree, within the frameworks traditionally used in international relations theory.

II. The Atlantic relationship and its influence in space

The collaborative efforts in space exploration between European nations and the United States have not only transcended the boundaries of scientific inquiry but have also played a crucial role in strengthening the transatlantic relationship itself. Notably, the International Space Station (ISS) stands as a testament to this enduring collaboration, with European Space Agency (ESA) members contributing significantly. Beyond Earth, joint missions like Cassini-Huygens to Saturn showcase shared successes in planetary exploration. Furthermore, the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope underscores reliance on mutual capabilities, exemplified by its launch using an Ariane 5 launcher from ESA. Similarly, ESA's reliance on SpaceX's Falcon 9 launchers during the interim period between the decommissioning of Ariane 5 and the entry into service of its successor, Ariane 6, exacerbated by the loss of access to Soyuz launchers following sanctions imposed on Russia after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, illustrates the collaborative dimension of the transatlantic space relationship. At the same time, this dependence has been widely perceived within European space policy and industrial circles as a critical vulnerability, underscoring the strategic risks associated with reliance on non-European launch capabilities.

The Euro-American cooperation in space has also a big defence component, with the origins of space cooperation being traced back to military projects in many cases, and this component has been gaining momentum in the last years, particularly after NATO

[13] Pace, S., 2023. US Space Policy and Theories of International Relations: The Case for Analytical Eclecticism. Space Policy, p.101538.

officially recognized space as an operational domain in 2019[14], and with several of the members of the alliance integrating space in their defence strategies, like the USA[15], France[16], the UK[17], Italy[18] and Spain[19]. This acknowledgment marked a pivotal shift, reflecting the growing recognition of the critical role that space assets play in modern defence and security strategies.

However, in tandem with this cooperation in space, the determination of a number of European countries to uphold a degree of strategic autonomy has gained momentum, particularly catalysed by the war in Ukraine and the perceived risks of overreliance on the United States for security, including space-based capabilities. In its space dimension, the conflict has starkly demonstrated the critical relevance of satellite communications and other dual-use assets, with Starlink providing essential connectivity to Ukrainian military and civil authorities[20]. At the same time, recent episodes of uncertainty surrounding service provision, as well as broader concerns about the political reliability of US supporting Ukraine, have heightened European anxieties over dependence on a single, non-European commercial provider for critical infrastructure. As a result, European policymakers have increasingly emphasised the lack of credible European alternatives to Starlink and the strategic vulnerabilities this entails[21]. In the short term, solutions such as OneWeb and the EU's GOVSATCOM initiative are often discussed as partial mitigations, while in the longer-term IRIS² is framed as the cornerstone of a sovereign European secure connectivity capability.

As a result of this context, the concept of European Strategic Autonomy has gained

[14] NATO, (2019) NATO's overarching Space Policy, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_190862.htm
[15] Department of Defense. (2020) Defense Space Strategy, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jun/17/2002317391/-1/-1/1/2020_DEFENSE_SPACE_STRATEGY_SUMMARY.PDF
[16] Ministière des Armées, (2019). Stratégie Spatiale de Defense, https://www.vie-publique.fr/sites/default/files/rapport/pdf/194000642.pdf
[17] Ministry of Defence (2022), Defence Space Strategy: Operationalising the Space Domain, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61f8fae7d3bf7f78e0ff669b/20220120-UK_Defence_Space_Strategy_Feb_22.pdf
[18] Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2023. National Security Strategy for Space. Rome: Presidency of the Council of Ministers. https://presidenza.governo.it/AmministrazioneTrasparente/Organizzazione/ArticolazioneUffici/UfficiDirettaPresidente/UfficiDiretta_CONTE/COMINT/NationalSecurityStrategySpace.pdf
[19] Presidencia del Gobierno; Consejo de Seguridad Nacional, 2025. Estrategia de Seguridad Aeroespacial Nacional. https://cms.spacesecurityportal.org/uploads/National_Aeroespace_Security_Strategy_2025_Accesible_caafdb9f54.pdf
[20] Ogden, T., Knack, A., Lebret, M., Black, J. and Mavroudis, V., 2024. The Role of the Space Domain in the Russia-Ukraine War. The impact of converging space and AI technologies. CETaS Expert Analysis.
[21] GrudlerCh [@GrudlerCh] (2025) 'Christophe Grudler MEP letter to Commissioner Kubilius' [X], Brussels, 24 Feb 2025.

notoriety within the EU institutions and its member states. Defined as "the capacity of the EU to act autonomously - that is, without being dependent on other countries - in strategically important policy areas" [22], first appeared in an official EU document in 2013 and gained substantive importance with the establishment of the EU Strategic Compass in 2022[23], emerging as a key strategic driver for the current EU Commission.

Against this backdrop, many EU policy makers see it as critical to fortify the European strategic autonomy in order to safeguard its interests in an evolving international geopolitical landscape, and the space sector is one of the critical areas which are clearly mentioned in several EU documents. As a direct result of this shift towards space autonomy, in 2022 the EU announced the creation of IRIS²[24], a new secure-connectivity satellite constellation that will provide high-speed internet and communication in all EU territory, including outmost regions where terrestrial and broadband connection remain scarce. Further on this strategic intent, the European Commission and the former High Representative (HR) for Foreign Affairs and Security policy, Josep Borrell, launched the European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence[25] on 10 March 2023, a document which points at many of the space ambitions of the EU member states and establishes the criticality of striving for autonomy in space[26]. This document clearly states that "*Space systems and services in the EU contribute to the strategic autonomy of the EU and its Member States. They are key assets that will contribute to shaping the future competitiveness, prosperity and security of the EU for next generations*".

However, in that same document it is also mentioned that maintaining cooperation in space with the US is considered vital by the EU member states, being specifically mentioned this partnership on space security and defence in a dedicated section within the document. This section mentions the specific aim of establishing a partnership in the area of space situational awareness, following on the ongoing discussions regarding

[22] Damen, M., 'EU strategic autonomy 2013–2023: From concept to capacity'. European Parliament Briefing, EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, July 2022.
[23] European External Action Service, 'A strategic compass for security and defence', Brussels, 21 Mar. 2022
[24] European Parliament, Regulation (EU) 2023/588 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2023 establishing the Union Secure Connectivity Programme for the period 2023-2027
[25] European Commission, Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, 'European Union Space Strategy for Security and Defence', JOIN(2023)9, 10 Mar 2023.
[26] González Muñoz, R. and Portela, C., 2023. The EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence: Towards Strategic Autonomy?. SIPRI

growing complementarity, interoperability, and redundancy of both parts Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GPS and Galileo). Hence, there is a clear intent on maintaining and strengthening venues of cooperation on several space areas, although autonomy is expected to be pursued by the EU in identified critical areas.

Beyond the specific space policy domain, this renewed emphasis on autonomy must also be understood within a broader European drive to enhance competitiveness and industrial resilience across strategic sectors. Recent initiatives and reports reflect this trend, including the Draghi report on European competitiveness[27], the European Defence Fund[28], and the European Defence Industrial Strategy[29], all of which place increasing emphasis on reducing critical dependencies, strengthening industrial capacity, and securing technological sovereignty in areas such as defence, digital infrastructure, and space. At the same time, developments on the US side have further reinforced European concerns. The most recent US National Security Strategy[30] articulates a more transactional and interest-driven approach to alliances and technological leadership, portraying Europe less as a strategic equal and more as a partner whose capabilities are often assumed to be subordinate to US leadership and priorities. Taken together, these dynamics highlight a growing structural tension between the EU's continued commitment to cooperation with the United States and its parallel efforts to build greater strategic autonomy and competitiveness, including in the space sector.

It is worth mentioning the particular case of the UK, maintaining a space cooperation with the USA which dates back to the 60s, with the entry in operation of the RAF Fylingdales radar, supporting Space Domain Awareness capabilities. In 2022, the US Space Command and the United Kingdom Space Command signed a Memorandum of Understanding concerning Enhanced Space Cooperation (ESC MOU) which, although non-legally binding, aims to increase exchange of information, harmonize military space

[27] European Commission (2024) The future of European competitiveness: A competitiveness strategy for Europe (Draghi Report). Brussels: European Commission.
[28] European Commission (2021) Regulation (EU) 2021/697 establishing the European Defence Fund. Brussels: European Union.
[29] European Commission (2024) A European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels.
[30] The White House (2022) National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Washington, DC: The White House.

requirements, and identify potential collaborative studies, projects, or activities[31]. And as of 2023, the UK has joined the Joint Task Force-Space Defence Commercial Operations Cell (JCO) global construct by standing up a national JCO-UK cell[32], reinforcing this collaboration with the US. In regards to intra-European space projects, the Brexit process has diminished UK space cooperation with the EU and its member states, but there are still European space joint efforts taking place under ESA, and the UK is still an important active member in those. Additionally, the UK recently re-joined a number of the EUs research and space programmes[33], namely Horizon Europe, Copernicus and the EU SST consortium, hence some cooperation with other European space faring nations would take place through those channels.

From the point of view of international cooperation and legislative bodies, both US and European countries have a history of, mostly, alignment in UNOOSA and COPUOS initiatives, with this collaboration manifested across a spectrum of resolutions, such as guidelines for long term sustainability and space debris mitigation[34].

III. Cislunar missions and space for defence

The last decade has witnessed a remarkable resurgence in cislunar missions, capturing the collective ambitions of a diverse array of countries venturing beyond Earth's confines. With an increasing number of nations actively participating in lunar exploration, the Moon has become a focal point for scientific discovery and technological innovation, as well as international collaboration and competition, in a reflection of Terran geopolitics. As this global undertaking unfolds, a pivotal dimension of this lunar resurgence is encapsulated in the NASA-led Artemis Accords, a set of 10 principles shaping international cooperation and “good behaviour” in space exploration[35]. With 59 signatory countries within the

[31] USSPACECOM and UKSpaceCom Sign Enhanced Space Cooperation MOU, April 6, 2022, Spacecom, https://www.spacecom.mil/Newsroom/News/Article-Display/Article/2991518/usspacecom-and-ukspacecom-sign-enhanced-space-cooperation-mou/

[32] UK Space Command establishes JCO-UK cell for enhanced global Space Domain Awareness, July 4, 2023, Royal Airforce, https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/uk-space-command-establishes-jco-uk-cell-for-enhanced-global-space-domain-awareness/

[33] Joint Statement by the European Commission and the UK Government on the UK's association to Horizon Europe and Copernicus, September 7, 2023, European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_4375

[34] UNOOSA, (2022) Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. https://www.unoosa.org/pdf/publications/st_space_49E.pdf

[35] NASA, The Artemis Accords, October 13, 2020, https://www.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Artemis-Accords-signed-13Oct2020.pdf?emrc=653a00

accords, this initiative intends to build upon the UN Space Treaty of 1967, which has remained without significative changes since its conception due to political disagreement among the nations contributing to COPUOS. Being many of the signatory countries from Europe, already many common projects are being established under the umbrella of the accords, with an important participation from European aerospace industry and research institutions. This initiative is in contrast to the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) [36], led by China and Russia, and with similar aims to the Artemis accords. Nevertheless, this alternative initiative has attracted fewer signatories, with only 13 countries (the only European being Belarus, aside from Russia itself), and it remains unclear how the two parallel initiatives will interact with each other in the future.

On the other hand, a country signing the Artemis accords does not prevent it from developing their own space missions and infrastructure. Within this autonomy several countries are developing their own capabilities for an independent access to space, such is the case with Japan and India, with both countries conducting successful lunar missions in 2023 and 2024 with their own space capabilities. This appears to be also the venue that the EU and its member states would like to take, establishing a balance between cooperation and autonomy, based on the official EU documents published. This strategic aim on the European side has been reinforced by concrete actions, such as the European Launcher Challenge[37], an ESA led programme establishing a European market of competitive launchers with the strategic objective of regaining an independent access to space. Nevertheless, this new ecosystem of European launchers would also be used in cooperation efforts with the US and other third countries, and within the framework of the Artemis accords. The question of how a space market with less state intervention, due to the strategic importance of the sector, and with a higher degree of free competition remains to be clarified nevertheless. Furthermore, with the release of the new EU Space Act[38], it is also to be seen how space legislation from the US and the EU would align respect to each other and the reflection that this will have on space cooperation between

[36] ROSCOSMOS & CNSA, International Lunar Research Station, Guide for partnership, June 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20220822205424/https://www.roscosmos.ru/media/files/mnls.pdf
[37] European Space Agency, 2025. European Launcher Challenge. [online] ESA. https://www.esa.int/Enabling_Support/Space_Transportation/European_Launcher_Challenge
[38] European Commission, 2025. Proposal for a Regulation on the Safety, Resilience and Sustainability of Space Activities in the Union (EU Space Act). COM(2025) 335 final, 25 June 2025., https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space-act_en

the two parts.

In regards to the use of space for defence for purposes, as well as the defence of space assets as well, the US and France have conducted space military exercises to test the resilience of space assets against ASAT attacks, such as the SKIES[39] and AsterX[40] series in the last years, and STEADFAST DEFENDER in 2024 integrated space with the rest of the operational domains in a multi-domain exercise with the participation of all NATO allies[41]. These exercises reinforce defence cooperation between the US and its European allies, as space gets incorporated as a critical domain inside the military, being particularly telling the progressive establishment of space commands or space forces specialised in this domain.

The European Union, along with its member states engaged in space activities, aspires to attain recognition as a significant actor in the realm of space. However, a salient challenge revolves around concerns related to political autonomy and the formulation of a unified common foreign policy[42]. Addressing this challenge necessitates a prospective undertaking of substantial political reforms, as delineated in the European Union's strategic proposal incorporating a hierarchical four-tier structure and considerations for a qualified majority vote. Additionally, there may be a requisite elevation in defence expenditures with a focus on space, potentially surpassing the already stipulated budgets. Such strategic measures are envisioned to empower the European Union and its member states to function as equitable partners in defence cooperation with the United States, fostering a nuanced equilibrium between autonomy and collaborative efforts.

IV. The future: A tale of uncertain possibilities

Euro-American space relations are entering a phase in which past assumptions of automatic alignment can no longer be taken for granted. Intensifying great-power

[39] Inaugural Exercise RED SKIES elevates USSF readiness, January 3, 2024, United States Space Force, https://www.spaceforce.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3630392/inaugural-exercise-red-skies-elevates-ussf-readiness/

[40] Delaporte, M., (2021). „ASTERX 2021: French Space Forces Reach for Higher Orbit.". https://breakingdefense.com/2021/04/asterx-2021-french-space-forces-reach-for-higher-orbit/

[41] NATO's Steadfast Defender 2024: Unprecedented Military Exercise Signals Alliance Unity and Preparedness, January 26, 2024, NATO, https://www.act.nato.int/article/steadfast-defender-2024-signals-alliance-unity-and-preparedness/#:~:text=STEADFAST%20DEFENDER%202024%20is%20a,of%20the%20Alliance%20to%20Europe.

[42] Gabriel Elefteriu, The role of space power in geopolitical competition, Council on Geostrategy, January 30, 2024, https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/the-role-of-space-power-in-geopolitical-competition/

competition, the strategic centrality of space, and the politicisation of technological interdependence are forcing both sides to navigate an increasingly delicate balance between cooperation and autonomy. For Europe in particular, the challenge is no longer whether strategic autonomy should be pursued, but how far, in which domains, and at what political and economic cost.

Three broad trajectories can be identified. The first is managed interdependence, in which Europe and the United States remain close partners, but with clearer rules governing reciprocity, crisis coordination, and dependency management. The second is asymmetric dependence, where Europe continues to rely heavily on US launch, commercial constellations, and military space support, while being perceived in Washington largely as a secondary contributor. The third is fragmented autonomy, characterised by a proliferation of European initiatives that struggle to achieve scale, coherence, or strategic impact. Avoiding the latter two outcomes requires deliberate and, in some cases, uncomfortable choices, particularly on the European side.

For Europe, space should become a test case for translating strategic autonomy from rhetoric into practice. This may imply ring-fencing European demand for critical services such as secure connectivity, launch access, and space domain awareness, even where this entails short-term inefficiencies or duplication with US capabilities. Projects such as IRIS², GOVSATCOM, and emerging launcher initiatives should be treated not merely as industrial programmes, but as cornerstones of political sovereignty and security resilience. At the same time, Europe must move beyond “autonomy by programme” towards “autonomy by design,” aligning EU, ESA, and national funding streams around clearly defined sovereign capability priorities and introducing dependency-reduction criteria as central elements in procurement and regulation.

More controversially, Europe should also begin to articulate a clearer political stance on the protection of its space infrastructure. Without replicating NATO, an EU-level solidarity logic for hostile acts against critical European space assets would signal that interference in space has tangible political and strategic consequences. This would strengthen deterrence and reduce ambiguity in an increasingly contested domain.

Transatlantic cooperation, however, remains indispensable. Yet it should be approached less as an unquestioned good and more as a strategic cooperation among partners. European access to US capabilities and markets should be matched by reciprocal

openness, predictability, and clarity regarding service continuity in crisis situations. Conversely, the United States has a strong interest in treating Europe not merely as a customer or junior partner, but as a strategic co-producer whose greater autonomy ultimately strengthens alliance resilience.

In this sense, the future of Euro-American space relations should not be framed as a zero-sum choice between autonomy and cooperation. A more mature partnership would accept a degree of European duplication in critical capabilities, while embedding cooperation in jointly governed frameworks that reduce political and operational fragility. If successful, such a recalibration could anchor responsible competition, reinforce global norms, and help stabilise an increasingly congested and contested space environment. Failure to do so risks leaving Europe strategically exposed and the transatlantic relationship ill-adapted to the realities of multipolar competition in space.

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