



A more strategic European Union in a more contested space

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Space is becoming an increasingly important domain for societies and politics alike, also from a geopolitical and hence security and defence perspective.
- The EU is a key actor in space, but its approach to space is changing in a more uncertain and contested geopolitical environment.
- While still focused largely on the civilian aspects of space, the EU has developed a more strategic approach towards space, increasingly using the domain also for security and defence, including military, purposes.
- As the EU develops quickly in a more challenging and uncertain environment, Norway needs to understand EU developments and their implications at an early stage, and work to secure participation where interests align.

A more strategic EU in a more contested space

Space is becoming an increasingly important domain for societies and politics alike. Driven by commercial, technological, and political developments, what was once a neglected area of international politics has over the last few years become increasingly prominent.

Partly, this is driven by the dawning realization of the extent to which modern societies are dependent on services provided by assets based in space. Like broader concerns over economic and technological dependencies, the embeddedness of satellite communications and location services in ever-more parts of the modern world has highlighted the fragility of space-based assets.

Moreover, the commercialization of space exploration and entry of large global enterprises has shone a new spotlight on the economics possibilities space holds. The shift in

how projects in space are funded, with innovation and needed services increasingly done by private companies and through decentralized forms of production involving non-state actors, has been the major shift also affecting how states can make use of outer space.

Into this changing composition of actors, new emerging opportunities, and awareness about fragility, geopolitics has been thrown into the mix with a vengeance. Perhaps most starkly illustrated by the utilization of Starlink for satellite communication during the war in Ukraine, the importance of space for a range of strategic assets has received renewed attention. The dawning of a “new space race” couples a long-running proliferation of national space programs and an expanding list of states with the willingness to participate, with growing international tensions and great power contests driven by animosity between the US and China in particular.

Into this contested and complicated space, the EUs approach to space is changing. While still focused largely on the civilian aspects of space, the EU has more recently also developed a more strategic approach towards space, also increasingly using the domain also for security and defence, including military, purposes.

An expanding role for the EU in space policies

The EU is a key actor in space, second only to that of the US. “Europe” has been an actor in space politics since the 1960s, from 1975 under the lead of the European Space Agency (ESA), a civilian agency. While ESA was established as an intergovernmental organization, nominally outside of the EU institutional framework, the EU itself has expanded its interest in and competencies over space over the last two decades. To some degree, the competencies over the internal market and the growing use of commercial entities for space exploration makes the EU a natural part. Moreover, the need for continued European cooperation, the infeasibility of national programs being competitive, and a perceived need for greater investment further embroiled the EU. Finally, through its gradually more assertive role in foreign policy and security policies, space offered a natural focal point for activities in Brussels.

A distinct EU space policy originated in January 2003 with the publication of two Commission papers. However, it was first with the Treaty of Lisbon the EU was given the ability to set its own policy. While such competencies did not extend into a harmonization of laws, it did allow for the coordination and support of projects aiming to explore space. Subsequently, the Commission followed up with a Space Strategy for Europe in 2016, an EU Space Programme in 2018, and the new Agency for the European Space Programme in 2021. The latter agency in turn houses what was by then a suite of EU flagship projects on space. As the EU expanded its space policy, it tied into an already existing project at the ESA on developing a global positioning system (eventually realized as Galileo), and

subsequently through the development of the Copernicus earth observation system, producing tangible outputs.

The expansion of EU’s role was not without controversy, however, in particular as the expansion came at the expense of the ESA. From the perspective of Brussels, space fits within a broader approach to ensure economic and societal resilience, but also as a means of achieving European strategic autonomy. Investments in space explorations and capabilities is not only a scientific endeavour, but a key building block for an envisioned Europe that is able to take on a larger role in global affairs. For the ESA, however, exploration of space is embedded in the idea of space as a particularly peaceful domain and exploration is for the betterment of humankind. While these tensions have been long-running, with the expanding role of the EU, the strategic ambitions and policies of the EU are becoming more important at the expense of the more idealistic currents within the ESA. For European policies towards space, the direction of the EU in the years ahead is therefore the key question.

The EU post-Ukraine: change and continuity in space

As noted in the introduction, both the geopolitical shock of the Russian invasion in 2022 and the evident importance of satellites-based communication systems in modern wars has shone a new light on the politics of space. Resultingly, the EU become increasingly concerned with the strategic defence aspects of space, linking the issue more explicitly to its quest for more strategic autonomy in an increasingly uncertain environment. Perhaps most clearly this development can be seen in the Iris2-programme (Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite), where EU builds an independent capability for secure communications for both military and civilian purposes. More broadly, both in the connection between EU foreign and security policies and the perception of space assets as a dual-use capacity, there is a much clearer strategic dimension with regards to the EU’s approach. The war in Ukraine has strengthened this approach, evident not only in the dual use approach to space, but also in the changing relation to the Russian space program.

At the same time, it is easy to overstate the shift in the EU approach and policies. The strategic perspective on space is an increasingly important theme in EU policies and strategies towards the domain, but in parallel with civilian use-cases and priorities. Compared to other major space actors, such as the US and China, the EU’s priorities remain more oriented towards economic and civilian priorities than strategic great-power competition. The continued delays and spiralling costs involved in the development of the Ariane 6 launch system underlines another side of the issue. Until a viable European system for competing with commercial ventures like Space X is in place, ideas about European strategic autonomy in space continues to face challenges.



EU-ESA informal space ministerial meeting in 2017.

Photo: Raigo Pajula (EU2017EE)

The EU as a more strategic actor in space. Implications for Norway

With the politics of space exploration and exploitation rapidly evolving, and the EU as a consequence developing new policies and tools, the trajectory of EU space politics is now two-fold. On the one hand, a continued focus on the civilian and economic importance of space linked to trade, communication and navigation, and a preference for creating stable framework conditions for such priorities through international regulation. But on the other hand, increasingly building and using space assets also for security and defence purposes. The gradually expanding role of Brussels has led to a shift in European space policies away from idealistic notions of cooperation for the betterment of humankind, to a more overtly political and strategic approach to the domain. As priorities continue to shift from the civilian logic of the internal market to a more strategic policies and the autonomy of the EU in space, questions about the form of cooperation and association by non-members is likely to re-emerge.

For Norway, this development already has clear security and defence implications, exemplified not least by the EU's satellite programme Iris2. Iris2 will facilitate secure communication in Europe, and will be used, among other things, for maritime surveillance and monitoring of strategically important areas such as the Arctic. It will also make the EU less dependent on US capabilities and systems. The system is based on private-public cooperation and will be fully operational in 2027. Iris2 is by its very nature a closed, secured system, and thus open only to EU member states and EU member state companies. At the end of 2023, Norway did not have an agreement on participation in IRIS,

in spite an expressed political and commercial interest in joining the program. This reflects broader challenges in Norway's ability to secure bilateral agreements with the EU.

As space exploration becomes more aligned with the EU as a strategic actor thinking about its security, the Norwegian position therefore becomes more uncertain. The challenges of these dynamics are not restricted to space, as a more assertive and strategic EU asks broader questions about how Norway's relation to the EU adapts to this reality. Also, with a tight and rapidly evolving EU security agenda, the EU does not prioritize EU-Norway agreements. However, as a rapidly evolving field with clear national interests also in the security domain, space is a critical case for how these dynamics might look. As the EU develops quickly in a more challenging and uncertain environment, Norway needs to understand EU developments and their implications at an early stage, and work to secure participation where interests align.

Further Reading:

Davis Cross, Mai'a K. (2021): 'United Space in Europe'? The European Space Agency and the EU Space Program. In EERR 26 (Special Issue), pp. 31–46. DOI: 10.54648/eerr2021025.

Klimburg-Witjes, Nina (2021): Shifting articulations of space and security: boundary work in European space policy making. In *European Security* 30 (4), pp. 526–546. DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2021.1890039.

Riddervold, Marianne (2023): The European Union's Space Diplomacy: Contributing to Peaceful Cooperation? In *Hague J. Dipl.* 18 (2-3), pp. 317–350. DOI: 10.1163/1871191x-bja10148.

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