# Europe accelerates drive for space autonomy amid shifting geopolitics



European political leaders have increasingly shifted focus from reliance on the United States, especially under the return of Donald Trump to the White House, prompting a rise in defence spending and a push for greater self-sufficiency in security matters. This movement toward autonomy is extending beyond traditional military domains into the realm of space technology, according to Josef Aschbacher, director general of the European Space Agency (Esa).

Speaking to the Guardian in London, Aschbacher emphasised the urgency and importance of Europe enhancing its independence in space. “There are many domains that are seen in space as the ones where Europe will want to increase its autonomy, and it is crystal clear in a more volatile geopolitical situation the need for more autonomy is there,” he said. He acknowledged the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape as a key driver of this strategic shift.

The global interest in space is intensifying, with governments and private firms alike investing heavily in satellites, sensors, and rocket technology amid what many describe as a second space race. This burgeoning sector, now valued at approximately $1 trillion, is expected to grow substantially in fields such as Earth observation, communications, and space tourism. Military spending increases in response to geopolitical tensions could further accelerate innovation and deployment in space technologies, particularly for surveillance and communications.

Despite this push for independence, Esa has historically maintained close cooperation with the United States. The agency collaborates with NASA on significant projects such as the International Space Station, the James Webb Space Telescope, and the Artemis programme aimed at lunar exploration. Aschbacher acknowledged these longstanding partnerships while managing a €7.7 billion budget this year, significantly smaller than NASA's $25.4 billion budget.

However, concerns about the continuity of this cooperation have arisen due to changes in US space policy and budget cuts under the Trump administration. Furthermore, the growing influence of private sector figures like Elon Musk, whose company SpaceX has revolutionised launch costs with reusable rockets, adds complexity to the relationship. Musk’s ambitions for Mars and his role as a key contractor for NASA under Trump's administration pose potential conflicts of interest. Additionally, SpaceX’s Starlink satellite network plays a critical role in global communications, notably supporting Ukraine’s military communications during the ongoing conflict with Russia.

When questioned about Musk’s influence on US space policy, Aschbacher refrained from commenting on internal US politics but expressed confidence in continued collaboration under the Artemis programme. “I am confident that the US will keep cooperating with Europe in the Artemis programme,” he said. Should US plans change, Aschbacher noted Esa’s preparedness to pursue alternative partnerships, mentioning Australia, the United Arab Emirates, and India as prospective allies.

Europe’s growing aspirations in space also reflect practical necessities. Following the retirement of the Ariane 5 rocket and technical issues with the Vega C launcher, European reliance on SpaceX for launching the Galileo satnav system presented challenges. This “launching crisis” was alleviated only with the maiden flight of the Ariane 6 rocket last year. Esa is now focusing on fostering competition within the European launch market, prioritising reusable rocket technology similar to SpaceX's innovations. Projects such as the Prometheus engine are in development, aiming for a launch within a few years, along with efforts by private companies like Germany’s Rocket Factory Augsburg.

Developments in the UK are also viewed as beneficial, with potential new spaceports, particularly in Shetland, poised to reduce dependence on Esa’s spaceport in French Guiana. Despite Brexit, the UK remains an active Esa member, although there was a brief interruption in its involvement with the Copernicus climate satellite programme.

While the increasing military applications of space technology may facilitate funding approval from member states keen to bolster defence capabilities, Aschbacher emphasised that Esa’s mission remains peaceful exploration and scientific advancement. He highlighted the importance of continued investment in space science for societal benefit, drawing parallels with the critical role of fundamental research in the rapid development of Covid-19 vaccines.

“Investments in space in Europe have to increase in order to make sure that Europe can sustain its standard of quality of life and standard of living for its people,” Aschbacher said. “Science is such a strength of Europe. It’s actually the reason why economic progress and economic development can happen or happen faster.”

This evolving landscape underscores Europe's strategic pivot toward deeper space capability and independence amid shifting geopolitical and technological dynamics.

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