The European Union's Position in an Increasingly Weaponized Outer Space Environment

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Abstract: Outer space is increasingly evolving into a contested strategic domain. This raises new challenges for the European Union's security and governance role. This paper examines how the EU can position itself amid growing militarization, technological competition, and reliance on transatlantic partnerships. It draws on an analytical framework combining strategic autonomy, alliance dependence, and norm diffusion. This paper argues that the EU cannot achieve full independence in space. Instead, it should act as a norm-setting, capability-complementing actor within an alliance framework. The EU can shape governance by leveraging regulatory strengths and selective capability development. This way, the EU can contribute to stability in an increasingly contested space environment.

Keywords: *European Union; space security; strategic autonomy; alliance dependence; norm diffusion*

Introduction

Outer space is rapidly transforming from a largely cooperative domain into a contested strategic environment.[1] Major spacefaring powers, including the United States, China, and Russia, are developing counter-space capabilities. This includes integrating space into missile-defence architectures and expanding dual-use satellite systems at an unprecedented pace.[2] These developments are unfolding in a context characterized by limited transparency, weak normative constraints, and increasing risks of miscalculation. As space-based assets become indispensable for civilian infrastructure, economic activity, and military operations, the consequences of disruption are growing significantly.[3]

Recent initiatives such as the proposed United States "Golden Dome" missile-defense architecture illustrate a shift toward the integration of space into broader deterrence and defense strategies.[4] For the European Union (EU), this evolution presents a complex strategic dilemma. While close alignment with the United States offers security and technological advantages, it also risks deepening strategic dependence and limiting the EU's influence over emerging norms governing space activities. At the same time, the EU has begun to strengthen its internal space governance and regulatory capacity, positioning itself as a potential leader in shaping responsible behavior in orbit.[5]

This paper asks: *How should the European Union position itself in an increasingly weaponized outer space environment while balancing strategic autonomy and alliance dependence?* It argues that the EU should position itself as a norm-setting and capability-complementing actor, leveraging its regulatory power, selective technological sovereignty, and structured transatlantic engagement. The paper first reviews the relevant literature, then develops an analytical framework based on strategic autonomy and norm diffusion, before analyzing EU capabilities and proposing policy recommendations.

Literature Review

[1] Clayton Swope, "The Future of Military Power Is Space Power," *Aerospace Security - Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 10 April 2025, https://aerospace.csis.org/the-future-of-military-power-is-space-power/.
[2] Victoria Samson and Brian Weeden. *2023 Global Counterspace Capabilities Report*. Washington, DC: Secure World Foundation, 2023. https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/2023-global-counterspace-capabilities-report
[3] Ely Sandler, "Governing Outer Space: A Conference of the Parties for the Outer Space Treaty," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, December 8, 2025. https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/space-cop-governance
[4] Kari A. Bingen, "Why Golden Dome for America: The Case the Administration Should Make," *Center for Strategic and International Studie s*, 30 January 2026, https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-golden-dome-america-case-administration-should-make
[5] Steven Blockmans and Daniel Fiott, "European Defence Projects of Common Interest: From concept to practice," *European Union - External Policies Analysis and Support Unit - Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union*, January 2026, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2026/775284/EXAS_STU(2026)775284_EN.pdf Torben Schütz, "Buying Time, Building Sovereignty: Turning Europe's Commercial Space Ambition into Strategic Capability," *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, February 2026, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/431_2026_BST_Policy_Brief_Buying_Time_Building_Sovereignty_ID2881.pdf

The evolving role of outer space in international security has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in light of intensifying geopolitical competition. A first strand of literature emphasizes the transformation of space into a contested strategic domain. Policy-oriented analyses by Victoria Samson and Laetitia Cesari highlight the proliferation of counterspace capabilities. This includes anti-satellite weapons, cyber operations, and electronic warfare. Together such counterspace capabilities are reshaping the security environment and increasing the risks of escalation and miscalculation.[6] Similarly, in their 2025 Space Threat Assessment, Clayton Swope, Kari A. Bingen, Makena Young, and Kendra LaFave underline the growing strategic importance of space systems and the vulnerabilities associated with military integration of such new capabilities. Additionally, they also emphasize that the increasing reliance on space-based infrastructure for both civilian and military purposes has reinforced the dual-use nature of space systems. This further complicates governance.[7] As a result, the traditional perception of space as a cooperative domain is increasingly challenged by dynamics of strategic rivalry. Overall, this literature converges on the view that outer space is evolving into a contested strategic domain characterized by military competition, technological interdependence, and heightened escalation risks.

A second strand of literature focuses on the European Union's pursuit of strategic autonomy in space. Daniel Fiott argues that space capabilities are central to the EU's broader ambition to act independently in security and defense, suggesting that strategic autonomy on Earth is inseparable from autonomy in space.[8] However, other scholars point to significant structural constraints. Clara Portela and Raúl González Muñoz highlight the institutional fragmentation and capability gaps that hinder the development of a coherent European space security policy.[9] Similarly, Chiara Cellerino underscores the legal and governance complexities arising from the division of competences between the EU, its member states, and actors such as the European Space Agency.[10] These analyses suggest that while strategic autonomy has become a guiding objective, its practical realization remains contested and uneven. Taken together, the literature indicates that EU space policy is increasingly driven by the pursuit of strategic autonomy, but that it simultaneously remains constrained by institutional fragmentation, external dependencies, and alliance dynamics.

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[6] Victoria Samson and Laetitia Cesari. *2025 Global Counterspace Capabilities Report*. Washington, DC: Secure World Foundation, 2025. https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/2025-global-counterspace-capabilities-report

[7] Clayton Swope, Kari A. Bingen, Makena Young, and Kendra LaFave, "Space Threat Assessment 2025," *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), April 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/space-threat-assessment-2025.

[8] Daniel Fiott, "The European Space Sector as an Enabler of EU Strategic Autonomy," *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, December 2020, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/reports/european-space-sector-enabler-eu-strategic-autonomy.

[9] Clara Portela and Raúl González Muñoz, "The EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence: Towards Strategic Autonomy?," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (SIPRI), June 2023, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2023/eu-non-proliferation-and-disarmament-papers/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence-towards-strategic-autonomy.

[10] Chiara Cellerino, "EU Space Policy and Strategic Autonomy: Tackling Legal Complexities in the Enhancement of the 'Security and Defence Dimension of the Union in Space'," European Papers, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2023, https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/eu-space-policy-and-strategic-autonomy

A third strand examines the EU's potential role as a regulator and norm entrepreneur in global space governance. Scholars such as Philip De Man and Jan Wouters argue that the EU is transitioning from a primarily regulatory actor to a more strategic player in space governance. The EU is building on its experience in shaping international norms in other domains.[11] Similarly, Gabor Zsolt Pataki highlights the EU's ambition to extend its regulatory influence into the security and defense dimensions of space, while also noting the challenges posed by geopolitical competition.[12] As space becomes more militarized, regulatory approaches must contend with geopolitical realities that limit consensus-building and compliance. Consequently, while the EU demonstrates a clear ambition to shape norms in outer space, its ability to do so, especially in the security domain, remains uncertain.

Taken together, these strands of literature provide important insights into the strategic, institutional, and normative dimensions of EU space policy. However, *limited attention has been paid to how the EU can simultaneously balance strategic autonomy, alliance dependence, and norm leadership in an increasingly weaponized space environmen*t. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing how these dynamics interact and what this implies for the EU's strategic positioning in outer space.

Analytical Framework

This paper adopts an analytical framework that conceptualizes the European Union's positioning in outer space as shaped by the interaction of three structural dynamics: 1) the pursuit of strategic autonomy; 2) the constraints of alliance dependence; and 3) the ambition to exercise norm-setting influence. This framework draws on existing debates in European security studies and international relations, combining insights from strategic autonomy literature with elements of norm diffusion theory.

Strategic autonomy has emerged as a central concept in EU security policy. Though there are many political and academic debates about what strategic autonomy means for the EU, at its most basic 'strategic autonomy' refers to the capacity of the Union to act independently in key strategic domains while reducing critical dependencies on external actors.[13] As Fiott argues, space capabilities are increasingly seen as essential to this objective, given their role in enabling both civilian and military functions.[14] However, strategic autonomy is inherently relative and constrained by existing institutional and geopolitical realities.

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[11] Philip De Man and Jan Wouters, "The European Union's Role in Global Space Governance: Between Regulation and Security," *Global Policy*, early view article, https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/articles/global-commons-and-environment/early-view-article-eu-space-governance-threshold-new-era

[12] Gabor Zsolt Pataki, "First EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence: What Implications for EU Strategic Autonomy?," *European Parliament Research Service*, August 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA%282023%29747448

[13] Charlotte Beaucillon, "Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor," *European Papers*, Vol. 8, No 1, European Forum, 27 (2023), pp. 417-428, doi: 10.15166/2499-8249/664.

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A key constraint is the EU's structural alliance dependence, particularly within the transatlantic security architecture. The EU remains deeply embedded in NATO and reliant on the United States for advanced military and space-based capabilities, including missile defense and early-warning systems.[15] Rather than representing a temporary limitation, this dependence constitutes a defining feature of European security, shaping both the scope and direction of EU space policy.

At the same time, the EU seeks to leverage its comparative advantage as a regulatory and normative actor. Drawing on norm diffusion theory, the Union can be understood as a "norm entrepreneur" that aims to shape international rules and standards.[16] This can also be applied in emerging domains such as outer space.

Taken together, this paper conceptualizes EU positioning in space as the outcome of a three-way strategic tension between autonomy, dependence, and norm leadership. This framework provides the basis for analyzing EU capabilities, external partnerships, and governance initiatives in the empirical sections that follow.

Empirical Analysis

Strategic Autonomy: Ambition & Constraints

The European Union has increasingly sought to strengthen its strategic autonomy in the space domain, recognizing space infrastructure as critical to both civilian and security functions. Programs such as Galileo, Copernicus, and the planned IRIS² constellation illustrate the EU's ambition to ensure independent access to positioning, Earth observation, and secure communications capabilities.[17] These initiatives are complemented by efforts to enhance industrial capacity and reduce reliance on external suppliers, particularly in sensitive technological components. At the policy level, the EU Space Strategy for Security and Defense explicitly frames space as a strategic domain in which autonomy is necessary to safeguard European interests.[18]

However, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy is constrained by persistent structural limitations. Institutional fragmentation remains a key challenge, with responsibilities divided among the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Union Agency for the Space

[15] Jeffrey Anderson and Federico Steinberg, "The Unbalanced Transatlantic Relationship: Understanding US Influence in Europe," *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (2025): 885–903. doi:10.1080/07036337.2025.2537377.
[16] Katharine Vadura, "The EU as 'Norm Entrepreneur' in the Asian Region: Exploring the Digital Diplomacy Aspect of the Human Rights Toolbox," *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2015): 349–360, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-015-0420-3.
[17] Siniša Vuković, "Peace Mediators as Norm Entrepreneurs: The EU's Norm Diffusion Strategy in Montenegro's Referendum on Independence," *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2020): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12424. European Commission, "IRIS² Secure Connectivity Programme," 16 December 2024, retrieved on 18 March 2026, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space/iris2_en.
[18] European Commission, "EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence," 2023, retrieved on 18 March 2026, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence_en

Programme (EUSPA), and the European Space Agency (ESA).[19] This complex governance structure complicates coordination and slows decision-making. In addition, the EU continues to depend on non-European technologies in critical supply chains. This ensures that the EU's military space capabilities remain comparatively underdeveloped.[20] Compared to the United States and China, the EU lacks integrated space defense systems and faces difficulties in translating civilian space strengths into security capabilities.

These constraints suggest that while the EU has made significant progress in developing space capabilities, its autonomy remains partial and uneven. While the EU has significantly expanded its space capabilities, its pursuit of strategic autonomy remains constrained by institutional fragmentation and technological dependencies, limiting its ability to act independently in a security-driven space environment.

Alliance Dependence: the EU within Transatlantic Space Security

Despite its ambition to enhance autonomy, the EU remains deeply embedded in transatlantic security structures, particularly through NATO. Space has been formally recognized as an operational domain by NATO, and the alliance increasingly integrates space-based capabilities into its deterrence and defense posture.[21] The United States continues to dominate in key areas such as missile defense, early warning systems, and advanced military satellite technologies,[22] making it an indispensable partner for European security.

Recent developments, including proposals for integrated missile defense architectures such as the so-called "Golden Dome," further illustrate the centrality of US capabilities in shaping the strategic environment.[23] For many EU member states alignment with the United States is seen as essential for security, reinforcing transatlantic dependence. At the same time, this reliance creates strategic asymmetries, limiting the EU's ability to independently define priorities in space security.[24]

Importantly, alliance dependence should not be understood solely as a constraint. Participation in

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[19] Chiara Cellerino, "EU Space Policy and Strategic Autonomy: Tackling Legal Complexities in the Enhancement of the 'Security and Defence Dimension of the Union in Space'," European Papers, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2023), https://www.europeanpapers.eu/europeanforum/eu-space-policy-and-strategic-autonomy

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NATO provides access to advanced capabilities, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and collective defense guarantees that would be difficult for the EU to replicate independently.[25] This suggests that alliance dependence is not merely a constraint but a structural condition shaping EU choices, requiring a careful balance between integration and autonomy.

Norm Leadership: the EU as a Space Governance Actor

Alongside its capability development and alliance integration, the EU has sought to position itself as a promoter of rules-based governance in outer space. The EU has a lot of experience as a regulatory power in other domains. The EU builds on this experience to support international efforts to enhance transparency, sustainability, and responsible behavior in orbit.[26] Its engagement within the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) and its earlier initiative to develop an International Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities reflect this ambition.[27]

More recently, the EU has focused on emerging governance challenges such as space traffic management, orbital debris mitigation, and the protection of critical infrastructure.[28] These areas align with the Union's strengths in regulation and standard-setting, offering an opportunity to shape global norms in a domain where formal legal frameworks remain limited. At the same time, the EU has sought to work through multilateral institutions and coalition-building rather than unilateral initiatives.[29]

However, the increasingly contested nature of space complicates this approach. Competing governance models, including US-led initiatives such as the Artemis Accords and alternative approaches promoted by China and Russia, reflect diverging strategic interests.[30] In this context, the EU's ability to act as a norm entrepreneur depends not only on its regulatory capacity but also on its geopolitical influence.

Positioning under Structural Tension

[25] European Commission, "EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence," 2023, retrieved on 18 March 2026, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence_en

[26] Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations in New York, "EU Statement – UN General Assembly 4th Committee: Peaceful uses of outer space," *European External Action Service*, 29 October 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%93-un-general-assembly-4th-committee-peaceful-uses-outer-space-1_en

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[28] Gabor Zsolt Pataki, "First EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence: What Implications for EU Strategic Autonomy?," *European Parliament Research Service*, August 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA%282023%29747448

[29] European Commission, "EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence," 2023, retrieved on 18 March 2026, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/eu-space-strategy-security-and-defence_en

[30] Victoria Samson and Laetitia Cesari. *2025 Global Counterspace Capabilities Report*. Washington, DC: Secure World Foundation, 2025. https://www.swfound.org/publications-and-reports/2025-global-counterspace-capabilities-report

The analysis demonstrates that the European Union's position in outer space is shaped by the interaction of three structural dynamics. The pursuit of strategic autonomy drives investments in capabilities and governance. Still, these efforts remain constrained by institutional fragmentation and enduring alliance dependence on the United States and NATO. At the same time, the EU seeks to leverage its comparative advantage as a norm entrepreneur. It aims to contribute to shaping global space governance, particularly in areas related to sustainability and responsible behavior.

Taken together, these dynamics create a structural tension that defines the EU's strategic room for maneuver. The Union is neither able to act as a fully autonomous space power nor confined to a purely subordinate role within transatlantic structures. Instead, its positioning is characterized by the need to balance independence, cooperation, and influence across different dimensions of space policy. This tension forms the basis for assessing how the EU can most effectively position itself in an increasingly contested space environment.

Discussion

The findings of this paper have important implications for how the European Union should position itself in an increasingly weaponized outer space environment. The analysis suggests that the EU cannot realistically pursue full strategic autonomy in space. The EU has a structural dependence on the United States, especially for critical security capabilities. Attempts to replicate the comprehensive military space capabilities of major powers such as the United States or China would require huge amounts of resources. Though there is a call for strategic autonomy, there does not appear to be any commitment for the EU to operate completely outside of the American space capabilities.

The EU is not without agency. Its established strengths as a regulatory actor and its experience in shaping international norms provide a viable pathway for strategic positioning. Rather than seeking to compete directly in the militarization of space, the EU is better positioned to act as a norm-setting and capability-complementing actor within an alliance framework. This involves leveraging its regulatory power to promote responsible behavior, transparency, and sustainability in orbit. The EU can simultaneously strengthen selective technological capabilities that reduce critical dependencies.

Such a hybrid approach allows the EU to mitigate the risks associated with overdependence without undermining transatlantic cooperation. It also enables the Union to exert influence in areas where military power alone is insufficient to shape outcomes. In this way, the EU's strategic value lies not in matching the capabilities of other space powers, but rather in shaping the rules and structures that govern an increasingly contested domain.

Policy Recommendations

Building on the analysis, the European Union should pursue a strategic approach to outer space that balances autonomy, alliance integration, and norm leadership. These recommendations follow from the three structural dynamics identified in the analysis: strategic autonomy, alliance dependence, and norm leadership. Rather than seeking full-spectrum independence, EU policy should focus on three mutually reinforcing priorities.

First, the EU should strengthen internal coherence and selectively enhance strategic capabilities. This includes improving coordination between institutional actors such as the European Commission, ESA, and EUSPA. Additionally, this also includes prioritizing investments in critical infrastructure and technologies that reduce key dependencies. A clearer strategic doctrine for space security would help align member state positions and enable more effective collective action.

Second, the EU should institutionalize structured engagement with the United States and NATO in the space domain. Given the structural nature of alliance dependence, the objective should not be to decouple from transatlantic frameworks, but to shape them. Establishing dedicated EU–US and EU–NATO dialogues on space security would allow the EU to influence emerging architectures. This could for instance include missile defense integration. This enables the EU to safeguard its strategic interests.

Third, the EU should consolidate its role as a norm entrepreneur in global space governance. It can contribute by advancing initiatives on space traffic management, debris mitigation, and responsible behavior. This allows the EU to leverage its regulatory strengths to shape international standards. Building coalitions with like-minded partners will be essential to ensure that these norms gain global traction in an increasingly contested domain.

Conclusion

Outer space is rapidly emerging as a contested strategic domain. It is characterized by increasing militarization, technological competition, and weak governance structures. For the European Union, this evolving environment presents a complex strategic dilemma: how to enhance its role in space while balancing ambitions for autonomy with enduring alliance dependence. This paper has argued that the EU's positioning is shaped by the interaction of these constraints and opportunities. This limits the EU's ability to act as a fully autonomous space power, but also opens space for alternative forms of influence. In this context, the EU should act as a norm-setting, capability-complementing actor within an alliance framework. By leveraging its regulatory strengths, selectively enhancing critical capabilities, and actively shaping transatlantic engagement, the EU can contribute meaningfully to stability and governance in an increasingly contested domain.

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