

## European Commission: Taking Charge of Space Defense

By

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European Commissioner Thierry Breton recently recalled what former President Donald Trump told the president of the European Commission (EC), Ursula van der Leyen, back in 2020. Trump suggested that he was extremely skeptical about North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) commitment to European defense. As a result, it came as no surprise that [Breton announced](#) that the Commission will take charge of sovereign launch policy and European space defense at the January 2024 European Space Conference in Brussels.

The European Commission is the European Union's (EU) executive arm, responsible for drafting legislative proposals. It also implements the decisions of the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. This means the EC calls the shots when it comes to the outline of policy. For EU member-states, they must balance national interest against the sovereignty relinquished to the EC.

Breton, the current Commissioner for the European Union Internal Market at the European Commission, leads, among many markets, the space sector. His political mandate is to ensure European [access to space](#). Furthermore, Timo Personen, head of the [Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space](#) at the EC, made it clear that Europe must take [responsibility](#) of its own defense in space.

While the European Commission's key actions for 2024 start with the creation of a single market for space, regaining independent access to space begins with Ariane VI and Vega-C, which are set to become operational this year. Additional launch programs are also coming, protecting space systems and boosting space commercialization are also important.

Commissioner Breton put an emphasis on delivering new services for space defense needs. The EU's efforts to address challenges, foster innovation, and deliver strategic autonomy in space appear to be serious efforts this time around. And while these remain forward-looking statements, the new [European Strategy for Security and Defense](#) and the above-mentioned EC decisions are triggering a renewed dynamic of bolder and better aligned European leadership and stronger political will in upgrading its defense. This is all while reckoning with the central role the space domain will play. Including proper capacity-building for the new European secure connectivity satellites constellation [IRIS2](#)—pending resolution of current issues—is also an important move.

While the EC is taking over European space policy, starting with independent launch and defense, there is still a role left to national space agencies and the European Space Agency (ESA) itself. [ESA will remain](#) in its various roles and funded by individual member states. These agencies, including ESA, have mandates in space science and exploration—cis/lunar space and beyond—and anything “space for Earth,” such as Earth observation supporting downstream data markets.

ESA is also deeply involved in space-based solar power studies, and its overall activity goes far beyond launch. However, the current programing, funding, and execution model for Western space agencies is a question. One may wonder whether that model remains relevant, also looking at the weight of the military among Indo-Pacific space powers. Should European nations relinquish the leadership and execution of land, maritime, and air economies and defense to agencies respectively in charge of agriculture and forestry, oceanography, and atmospheric studies? Of course not, but then why are they doing exactly that in the space domain?

For example, Europe has shipyards that are owned by the government, the private sector, or a combination of both, and they serve military and civilian markets. Some would argue that the current space agency model is simply broken. Many also believe that commercial and economic space development, together with defense, should eventually be tackled by organizations that are fit-for-purpose. The mindset for such purposes is not prevalent among space agencies, satisfied with basic science and exploration only. Setting up fit-for-purpose organizations would not exclude cooperation with space agencies, but it would streamline the policy budgeting and execution for each purpose.

The [doubts expressed](#) by Mike Griffin concerning the Artemis program is [one example](#). Such concerns may eventually lead to considerations about what forms or organizations are fit-for-purpose to effectively run economic development and defense programs in space—on budget and on schedule. However, major institutional changes in the foreseeable future should not be the expectation.

As the Biden administration and Congress further address the defense of the United States, the space domain looms large. Defense of national interest needs to continue to involve deep engagement and multi-domain cooperation with Indo-Pacific, Middle East, and European allies—space included. It sounds strategically and fiscally reasonable to expect allies to provide a stronger contribution to their own defense and the joint-interest of collective defense. Should NATO require serious recalibration, that might start with aligning the actual weight of European contributions with the rhetoric. European states need to walk the walk of “strategic autonomy” by taking responsibility, starting with some fiscally irreversible defense and security engagement in the space domain.

Europeans must take charge of their own defense, focusing on space. Commissioner Breton decided, the EU will take substantially increased responsibility for its own defense as part of the alliance—an essential step to taking the alliance to the next level. It is crucial for a fiscally responsible EU to shoulder its fair share of the burden. Seen from an orbital space perspective, it becomes apparent that the security of the alliance goes beyond the North Atlantic. The Arctic, the Eurasian continental plate, and Indo-Pacific all matter. Europe is better off if it fosters alliances/partnerships and advocates for policymakers who support such policies.

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