

Perspectives on a European Space Council

1. *Proposal for a European Space Council*

On January 22nd 2019, during the opening speech of the 11th Conference on European Space Policy, Ms Elżbieta Bieńkowska, Commissioner for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs stressed the “need to set in motion a process to define Europe’s vision for Space”. To achieve this goal, she suggested the establishment of a “European Space Council attached directly to the European Council or its President”. This proposal would be the culmination of a process aiming at emphasising the comprehensive strategic nature of the European space sector and the need to project European ambitions in space around a shared, long-term vision endorsed at the highest political level and allowing to position space at the core of the political debate while ensuring a coherent European approach.

Today, the highest level of the current European space policy framework comprises two different bodies at Ministerial level overseeing, with a short- to mid-term perspective, the European Space Agency on one hand and space affairs of the European Union on the other hand. Every two or three years the ESA Council gathers Ministers in charge of space to decide about the orientation, programmes and funding for the Agency. At EU level, it is the Competitiveness Council (COMPET) that deals with space, together with trade, economy, industry, transport, research and innovation.

With the mission of drawing a common, long-term, strategy and vision for Europe in space, the proposed European Space Council would define European ambitions on crucial issues such as strategic autonomy, economic and industrial policy, space security and defence, diplomacy or, in general, any topic that needs to be addressed at the highest political level to stimulate decision-making processes and ensure consistency of action.

2. *The governance of space within major space powers*

By bringing space higher in the European political agenda, the establishment of a European Space Council would better mirror the importance awarded to this sector by major space powers. Indeed, in all of them, the overarching political direction guiding the action of national space activities is etched at Head of State level.

- In Russia, the President is responsible himself for the implementation of the Russian space policy by issuing decrees or executive orders along with a periodic review of the activities of the Council of Ministers. The President is also monitoring the general development of the space sector through high-level meetings with the President of Roscosmos.
- In China, the competence to define the grand vision for space pertains to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, led by the President of the Republic.
- In Japan, the Prime Minister chairs the Strategic Headquarters for National Space Policy, which were established in order to comprehensively and systematically promote policies related to space development and utilization.
- In India, the organization of the Indian Space programme has been designed to ensure government support at the highest level through the Space Commission, delegated with necessary authority to set the policies, guide and oversee implementation of the programmes, and the Department of Space directly reporting to the Prime Minister.
- In the United States, the President re-established the National Space Council (NSC) in June 2017. Chaired by the Vice-President, the NSC has been established within the Executive Office with the mission to define the goals of the federal space programme, to delineate the required implementation activities and to monitor the progress.

3. Why do we need a European Space Council?

Initially driven by sovereignty and autonomy-related concerns - in particular in the field of access to space - the European space policy has gradually become increasingly economy-oriented. Indeed, this approach has been very successful in giving to the European industrial base the means to thrive and thus to ensure the availability of space capabilities for Europe's institutional or governmental needs, while sharing the burden of fixed costs related to the development of space technologies and exploitation of space infrastructures with commercial customers.

The success of Ariane and of European space manufacturers on commercial markets is indeed a tremendous achievement and further pursuing this winning game by capturing a sizable share of accessible markets has become an integral component of the European space policy. However, beyond the European technical excellence - which was clearly an enabling condition - several concomitant factors contributed to make this happen: for example, the combination of the American "only shuttle policy" and the disaster of Challenger at the time of the boom of space telecommunications business contributed to boosting the outstanding positioning of the Ariane rockets family on the launch service market. The current situation is quite different and in many respects more competitive and challenging. The key issue for European policy makers is thus to set objectives according to what would be desirable in terms of space capabilities and at the same time achievable on commercial markets.

Actually, Europe is quite unique in making such a great case of commercial perspectives in the definition of its space policy objectives. This "addiction to success" resulted in a resolutely business-oriented approach, more prone to reach consensus among member states. However, this prevented it from addressing space from a more political angle. Today there is a growing awareness of the need to revisit the "European way" to better cope with a fast-changing international landscape. Indeed, the global space arena is facing a deep change in the balance of powers and geopolitical relations as well as the emergence of new challenges in the area of commercial space as well as security and defence. The future position of Europe in space will strongly depend on its capacity to reconcile its approach with a strategic vision defining clear ambitions, a consistent implementation across the board, and to decide on allocations of resources accordingly. The establishment of a European Space Council, able to define such vision at the highest political level and to agree on decisive principles with a far-reaching and long-term impact would certainly be timely to pave the way ahead of Europe in space and of space in Europe.

4. Way forward

In this context, the proposal of Commissioner Bieńkowska to set up a European Space Council, "attached directly to the European Council or its President" and that "would gather all the space decision makers and actors, and advise directly our heads of states and government", appears quite relevant. Coming at the very end of the mandate of the current Commission, this recommendation for the future, left as a heritage, would certainly deserve proper examination.

However, it is well understood that the implementation and enforcement of such recommendation comes along with many major hurdles for a number of reasons including the reluctance of Member States to agree on any additional transfer of sovereignty towards European institutions, the need to revisit the concept of shared competency as far as Space Affairs are concerned, the adoption of a formal agenda including some security and defence policy raising concerns, or the appropriate involvement of ESA in this framework.

Given the difficulties to overcome in the potential establishment of such entity, it is unlikely to be implemented in the short term. However, triggering the debate would at least have the merit to initiate the unavoidable reflections on the long-term perspectives of the European space strategy and of its associated governance scheme, beyond leadership considerations.

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