

[Finding a common ground for international space regulation](#)

The increasing weaponisation of space poses a significant threat to the security of the planet. What we need now is open dialogue which fosters cooperation rather than rivalry, argues Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan.



Source: European Parliament Audiovisual Service



By [Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan](#)

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The EU recently [demonstrated](#) its invigorating contributions to the international space race with the announcement of an elevated budget to tackle the highly competitive space market. Its primary new project is said to revolve around a new lunar mission, titled the Gateway Project, which will act as a base for exploration of the moon while in orbit of it.

Although the project is said to be in collaboration with non-EU Member States as well as Member States, there are certain items on the EU's strategic space agenda that the UK will not be privy to, instead placing the UK in almost direct competition with the bloc on extra-terrestrial matters.

While the European Space Agency's (ESA) famed Galileo satellite navigation project is set to continue with planned updates as part of the recently announced budget, Brexit has meant that British companies, who were once poised to play an important role in the monumental task of building an array of satellites, have now been excluded from the project.

The UK's response? To build a rival satellite navigation system or, more economically, invest in the US satellite communications company, OneWeb.

In a world where all parties appear to be working towards some sense of "[strategic autonomy](#)" (as the EU puts it), in a domain recognised as a common area for all mankind, where does this leave room for cooperation, and who holds the authority on space governance and regulation?

Currently, the custodian of international law regarding activities in space is rooted in the United Nations, specifically, its [Office of Outer Space Affairs](#) (UNOOSA). It is largely looked upon as the convener of multilateral efforts to continue the development of the geopolitical space landscape. Its prime ratified agreement concerning space is the [1967 Outer Space Treaty](#) (OST), which proclaims that space is the "province of all mankind".

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However, as a contemporary regulatory framework, it still leaves much to account for. International actors find themselves navigating a treaty that addresses neither modern technologies nor the increased development of the private sector in the space industry; leaving them grappling with their own increasingly insular narratives around trade, economy and security as technologies evolve and competition grows.

One such example of this is the EU's newly established [key principles](#) for the global space economy, which set the scene for its tenth Space Council meeting last month. It calls for a global level-playing field, open economies, free and fair trade based on multilateral solutions, and reciprocity in the space sector.

Nonetheless, it also stresses "European non-dependence" and an "autonomous" approach to accessing space. One could argue that this triggers a greater conversation surrounding space governance, however, there remain contradictions that do not bode well for setting a cooperative precedent.

What leaders would do well to remember is that amidst all the innovation and economic prowess, there is a very real threat to a busy and cluttered space landscape, not to mention addressing space as a military domain.

Last year, [India](#) became the fourth country to launch a missile into space on the grounds of conducting an anti-satellite test, which many saw as serving a warning to China. Both China and the US have also

come under criticism for [accumulating](#) space debris after shooting missiles at their own satellites on separate occasions over the years. This has contributed to a legitimate fear that one day debris could make space too hazardous to navigate, with the added layer of potential collisions for those that do.

Last year, in response to growing concerns over protecting satellite and navigation assets from enemy interference, NATO [declared](#) space to be the alliance's "fifth domain" of operations, following land, sea, air and cyberspace. As NATO's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, points out, anti-satellite weapons also have repercussions for terrestrial operations as communications, air travel, weather forecasts or banking could easily become crippled.

The danger of excessive weaponisation and increased militarisation - in the name of enhancing national security - can have the unwanted effect of diminishing security in other areas. Any serious military escalation in space will hamper the world economy and impact peace on Earth. This is why I suggest that international institutions should bear in mind a [meta-geopolitical framework](#) that takes into account seven state capacities and five security dimensions that include :human, environmental, national, transnational and transcultural security.

"Given humanity's increasing and irreversible dependence on outer space for our collective and essential daily activities, if space becomes critically unsafe, it will not be selectively unsafe, but unsafe for all"

The reality is, however, that we find ourselves in a time where [divergence](#) across issues of legal principles and militarisation between the space-faring powers such as the United States, Russia and China, has allowed for escalatory geopolitical strategic narratives which are obstructing the effective international governance of space.

Given humanity's increasing and irreversible dependence on outer space for our collective and essential daily activities, if space becomes critically unsafe, it will not be selectively unsafe, but [unsafe for all](#).

A [cascading conflict in outer space](#) over the next twenty years (intentional or unintentional) represents a major frontier risk for global order, security and prosperity. Therefore, what we need is an open dialogue between states that ultimately revolves around cooperation, instead of perpetuating a vicious cycle of rivalry where economic and political gain trumps global security. The latter ought to follow a [framework](#) that includes a symbiotic and realistic international relations paradigm and a multi-sum security principle.

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