

A black hole where EU space policy should be

By Walter Thiebaut and Jan Wouters

Space matters. “Freedom of action in space is as important as air power and sea power,” declared the US in its latest space policy, issued last month. “Robust, effective, and efficient space capabilities” were, it said, national priorities, for scientific, military and economic reasons.

And for Europe? The reaction to the bold, even aggressive, US position has, thus far, been a sheepish silence. Given EU investment in space of €5 billion, roughly an eighth of US spending, this reticence should not surprise us, even though the new US space policy brings to the fore the crucial issues of military use of space and the denial of the use of space capabilities to anyone hostile to US national interests.

The absence of any real decision-making structure on space has plagued Europe since the beginning of its space efforts in 1962 and things were only partially improved with the foundation in 1975 of the European Space Agency (ESA), which brings together 17 European states.

The European Commission’s first communication on space in 1988 was a truthful admission that there was no proper policy.

Since then the ESA and the Commission have worked hard to find an appropriate remedy, through a framework agreement, white and green papers, and finally by the inclusion of a space policy competence for the EU in the – not yet airborne – constitution.

At least there is recognition of space as an essential element of any serious European global strategy, and as a sine qua non of a true foreign and security policy. But that is scarcely adequate.

As things stand, the grandly titled European Space Policy and Programme will certainly fail to achieve its initial ambition of rationalising and encouraging space policy. Nor does it give the Commission’s leadership in this area any significant boost.

To be fair, the political weather conditions have hardly been favourable to a successful launch.

EU member states have been unable or unwilling to take a common stand on issues of central importance and the Barroso Commission has matched this general lack of enthusiasm for further political integration. On top of that enlargement has complicated institutional fluidity and the negative votes on the constitution in the French and Dutch referenda have sapped whatever European political courage was left.

Today, Europe appears to have few objectives apart from safeguarding a status quo in which the Commission’s role has faded into the background. The lack of a global European vision, compounded by the logjam in the institutions, is the largest obstacle to seizing the opportunities that a fully fledged European space policy could offer.

The repercussions are clear and frankly dismal: the Commission carries out space activities through sectoral competencies (research, environment, transport, etc), but has little ability to put these at the service of any genuine vision. Ties between the EU and ESA have grown closer on the premise that the EU could bring political responsiveness to space activities; the reality is that this is currently not the case.

The EU needs space infrastructure if it is to progress in its ambition to become a world actor. The treaty provisions in force allow it to conduct designated space activities. In the short to medium term, the priority should be to get on with these, putting space at the top of the political agenda.

That means in practice elaborating a global strategy that encompasses civilian and security applications and the European Council insisting that space is mainstreamed in all EU policies, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy/European Security and Defence Policy, with a possible role for the European Defence Agency.

Meanwhile, member states should consider fine-tuning the ESA's architecture to meet the future requirements of the EU in security and defence policy as well as its other political priorities and ambitions.

Strengthening the ESA and European industrial capacities will plant the seeds of a stronger EU, one better able to contribute to global challenges through the use of space infrastructures.

□ The writers are members of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Space Studies (ICSS) at Leuven University, Belgium.