

## Trump’s Administration Plans for Space: Implications for Europe

### 1. Introduction

In contrast with previous campaigns, the 2016 U.S. Presidential election race paid little attention to the space domain. Yet, with no doubt major changes can be expected in space policy, on which the President-elect Donald Trump has expressed bold and sometimes controversial positions - which could have deep and lasting strategic and diplomatic implications across the world.

This notwithstanding, in light of this anticipated upheaval several factors of stability still remain regarding U.S. space policy. The first and foremost is that the overarching objective of the space dominance is not in question; on the contrary, it can be reasonably expected to be strongly reaffirmed. Moreover, it is buttressed by continued strong and deep bi-partisan general support in the U.S. Congress regarding contribution of national space assets to security and defence.

Nevertheless, some major changes appear unavoidable, primarily because of a number of external factors that are evolving or perceived differently by the ingoing administration: a shift from Russia to China as the U.S. main competitor; a – so far – limited sensibility on the topic of climate change; and an increasing sensitivity to the criticality of U.S. space infrastructure, and even more so of the vulnerability of such space assets vis-à-vis potential threats from foreign countries.

Furthermore, the U.S. space sector continues to witness a momentous rise of private actors. The way their activities and efforts will be regulated in the U.S. legal framework, both regarding the exploitation of LEO and, in the longer run, in space exploration and exploitation-related activities, will undoubtedly shape future U.S. and global space endeavours.

### 2. What might be the main priorities of the new Administration?

There are little indications on what the priorities of the new Administration might be. As no white paper nor official policy document has been released by the President-elect campaign or transition team so far, the global space sector is left to wait in suspense. Yet, statements released by space policy advisers to the campaign, chiefly by Robert S. Walker,<sup>1</sup> reveal that the next administration might work on updating the National Space Strategy document.<sup>2</sup> In Walker’s words, the new space

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Walker is former chairman of the U.S. House Science, Space, and Technology Committee, former chairman of the Commission on the Future of the U.S. Aerospace Industry, and senior policy adviser to the Trump campaign.

<sup>2</sup> The last official U.S. National Space Policy paper was released in 2010.

policy should be based on “vision, disruption, coordination and resilience”.<sup>3</sup>

It thus is very likely that the new Administration will seek to ensure U.S. strategy global leadership in space; renewing strategic investments to support national security with dedicated programmes; enabling robust commercial space actors in LEO, space exploration and resources exploitation; and further re-focusing NASA activities.

In this respect, Walker’s statements underline the need to update organisational structures, contract procedures and bureaucracies that President-elect Trump considers as outdated. Under the authority of the next NASA Administrator, who at this stage is still undecided, a reorganisation of the Agency will most likely be undertaken, i.a. by reducing or shifting NASA portfolio elements – namely Earth science – focusing NASA mostly on space science and exploration missions. Walker also suggested along this restructuring that a National Space Policy Council might be reinstated, likely headed by the Vice-President, with the aim of ensuring a better coordination between DARPA (DoD), NASA and the private sector. This would ensure that “the U.S. remains well ahead of the technology curve”. Furthermore, under such a framework “every federal government agency [might] develop a plan for utilising space assets in the fulfilment of their mission”, and a business-oriented approach would be implemented, to reduce costs and avoid duplications, with “an increased reliance on the private sector to provide solutions” even in very sensitive fields (e.g. military space activities).<sup>4</sup>

In terms of technology and hardware developments, statements from policy advisors and President-elect Trump himself put the spotlight on two major developments which have a strong dual-use approach. The first is smaller, new generation and more robust constellations of satellites, chiefly to improve resiliency of U.S. military capabilities. The second is new technologies that could cause an upheaval in warfare, including hypersonic weapons, referring again to the perceived threats from foreign space powers. Lastly, in line with a more protectionist view of the global economy, it seems unlikely that ITAR regulations would be subject to a relaxation.

### 3. *Implications and opportunities for Europe*

The magnitude of the potential shifts in the space policy of the world’s foremost space power undoubtedly will reverberate in Europe as well, revealing – as it is often the case – both opportunities and risks at the same time.

For example, one of the consequences of the eventual restructuring of NASA Earth science activities might be the opportunity for Europe to take the lead in areas such as environment monitoring and climate change where a U.S. backtracking might leave a gap. This includes also disaster-risks reduction related activities and energy-related businesses, where the role of space assets can be instrumental for the full exploitation of renewable resources. In this context, Europe can develop its capabilities and increase its geopolitical influence, particularly considering the fact that the effects of climate change have implications for all countries on the planet, well recognised as a political priority both in the context of COP21 and of the UN Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development.

Conversely, Europe is still heavily reliant on the U.S. for a large amount of space-related electronic components as well as space-based information. Regarding the latter, if for instance space surveillance data dissemination is transferred to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), will European users still have free and unrestricted access to this vital information for operating their space assets? More broadly this could be put into perspective together with statements related to NATO as made by President-elect Trump. These two challenges – among others – should be indeed taken seriously by European policy-makers, and with appropriate responses to be given in a short timeframe. This is needed to guarantee full autonomy of Europe in the fields of space critical technologies, SSA-related data, and ultimately European Security & Defense. Last but not least,

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Walker intervention during a panel discussion at a meeting of the FAA Commercial Space Transportation Advisory Committee (COMSTAC), 26 October 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Foust, Jeff. “Next steps for space policy.” 14 Nov. 2016. TheSpaceReview. Accessed 16 Jan. 2017. Web: <http://www.thespacereview.com/article/3105/1>.

safeguarding these aspects would allow the European industry to remain an active player in all the expected private-led initiatives to come.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the Europe-U.S. collaboration in human space activities and exploration has strong structuring effects on the crafting of the European policy in these matters. Since Europe has been a long-lasting, privileged partner of the U.S. in manned space exploration, it remains to be seen whether this partnership will be challenged by the expected change in the U.S. international posture.

Regarding the legal framework applicable to the private exploitation initiatives of space resources following the U.S. Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act (CSLCA), it is expected that it will be retained and possibly reinforced by the new administration. This might trigger strong resistance from international partners, pressing Europe to define its position in these matters. Similarly, a major policy change of the new U.S. administration might involve further development of U.S. anti-satellite weapons and/or systems, along with the principles of “freedom of action in space” in order to secure U.S. space assets. As said above, this decision would undoubtedly generate intense discussion – and it is unclear how Europe could respond in this regard, but quite clear to anticipate the reaction of Moscow and Beijing.

To conclude, despite these (and others, as of yet undefined) anticipated changes in U.S. space policies, and aside the often scathing rhetoric, the European leadership must ensure that this successful, long-lasting trans-Atlantic partnership will prevail. In this regard, a key opportunity for Europe could be represented by a more active involvement of European stakeholders in the debate and positioning surrounding a potential new U.S. national space policy, ultimately maybe to reframe a new basis for an improved space trans-Atlantic partnership. At the same time, there is the perhaps historic opportunity for Europe to achieve a higher degree of autonomy (in space affairs, and beyond) and consolidate cohesion among European partners, at times of greater and greater worldwide uncertainties.

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