



UK–EU Space Co-operation for European Strategic Autonomy

Reintegrating the UK into Europe's space initiatives for shared security and prosperity.

Key Policy Recommendations

The following four steps should be taken to strengthen space cooperation between the UK and the EU, in a way that boosts national security and economic growth in an increasingly multipolar world:

- **Pursue structured re-entry into EU space programmes**, including Galileo's secure Public Regulated Service (PRS) and the IRIS communications constellation, through negotiated association agreements.
- **Accept necessary compromises** such as budget contributions and EU-aligned security protocols, recognising these as strategic investments in autonomy and alliance-building.
- **Strengthen diplomatic outreach** to key EU member states to rebuild trust and secure consensus on UK participation in space governance.
- **Frame UK–EU space cooperation as a strategic pillar** of a broader realignment with Europe, contributing to a cohesive European sphere of influence among like-minded democracies.

The impact of deeper co-operation

Closer cooperation with the EU in space has the potential to deliver the following key impacts:

- **Restored strategic capabilities**: Access to Europe's secure satellite navigation and comms infrastructure reduces dependence on external actors.
- **Renewed industrial opportunity**: UK companies regain eligibility for high-value EU contracts, boosting innovation and exports.
- **Amplified European security**: Combined assets protect critical infrastructure, reinforce shared deterrence, and bolster crisis response.
- **Enhanced global standing**: A stronger European alliance offers an alternative to China's and Russia's space ambitions, upholding democratic norms.
- **Long-term alignment**: Joint space projects can foster mutual trust, smoothing a path for broader UK–EU convergence over the coming decade.

The case for UK-EU space collaboration

Since Brexit, the **UK has been largely shut out of the EU's flagship space programmes**, creating gaps for both sides. Key services and projects that were once jointly developed – such as the Galileo satellite navigation system – have become points of divergence. The UK lost access to Galileo's most secure function (PRS) and the ability to help shape its future, prompting **Britain to consider costly alternatives**.

Meanwhile, the EU proceeded with new strategic space initiatives (worth billions) without one of Europe's leading space nations. This fragmentation has strategic consequences: **Europe's overall capacity in space is weakened when cooperation breaks down**.

The problem is rooted in political constraints. The UK's desire to maintain complete sovereignty and avoid 'EU control' collided with the EU's legal rules that restrict sensitive programmes to members. London set Brexit 'red lines' against paying into the EU budget or accepting EU regulatory oversight, which made sustained participation in EU space projects seemingly impossible.

Yet the result – **a go-it-alone approach – left both worse off in space**. The UK lost independent secure satellite navigation, while the EU lacks British contributions in funding, industrial expertise, and military partnership. In an era when space is increasingly critical for everything from navigation in conflict to monitoring climate change, this rift undermines Western collective strength. **Competitor powers (such as China and Russia) benefit from a divided Europe in space**.

The need now is to find a pragmatic way to bridge this divide – to allow UK–EU space cooperation without politically unacceptable losses of face on either side. Recent geopolitical shifts, including war in Europe and rapid advances by rival powers, put into perspective the cost of not working together.

Policymakers must recognize that **not cooperating in space poses greater risks to national security and economic growth** than the compromises such cooperation requires.

Evidence base

Post-Brexit studies show the **UK's reliance on external partners** for secure satnav and military-grade communications has grown, raising concerns about sovereignty and resilience.

Recent geopolitical shifts, including war in Europe and rapid advances by rival powers, put into perspective the cost of not working together.

UK space companies have also reported **lost contracts and relocation pressures to remain competitive** in EU-funded projects.

Recent deals, such as the UK's renewed participation in the Copernicus Earth observation programme, demonstrate that **association agreements are possible if both sides commit to fair terms and cost-sharing**.

Norway's model for Galileo's Public Regulated Service likewise illustrates how non-EU states can access vital encrypted signals by accepting security protocols and financial contributions.

Collectively, these examples confirm that **bridging the divide is doable and brings tangible returns**.

Implementation

A renewed UK–EU space partnership can be delivered through a phased and realistic plan:

1. To restore its strategic space capabilities, the UK should begin formal negotiations with the EU for re-entry into flagship space programmes

In particular, Galileo’s encrypted Public Regulated Service (PRS). Access would require the UK to accept EU security oversight and standards in exchange for user rights. This means acknowledging that benefits cannot be cherry-picked without regulatory alignment, but the strategic returns would justify such compromises.

2. Financially, the UK must be prepared to contribute to programme-specific budgets

This should be framed not as ‘paying Brussels’ but as purchasing access to vital infrastructure. For instance, joining the IRIS communications network would involve negotiated contributions in return for service access and limited governance input, possibly through observer roles similar to Horizon Europe.

The Copernicus model—where the UK regained access in return for contributions—proves such deals are viable.

3. Securing EU acceptance will depend on high-level diplomacy

The UK should build on improved post-Windsor relations to propose a bespoke cooperation accord and hold quiet consultations with key EU institutions and space-faring member states.

Confidence-building measures—such as contributing to a distinct European space geopolitical position and aligning with EU technical standards—can reassure partners about UK reliability and strategic alignment.

4. A realistic timeline targeting political agreement within 1–2 years, with possible further association by the 2028–2034 EU budget cycle

UK proposals should be tabled by 2025, accompanied by parliamentary briefings to build long-term support. Existing mechanisms, such as the UK–EU Specialised Committee, could facilitate these agreements.

5. Looking ahead, policymakers should remain open to deeper EU alignment

This could even include considerations for associate membership models in the long term. Space cooperation could be a catalyst for broader strategic rapprochement.

6. Public communication will be key

Highlighting benefits, tackling sovereignty concerns, and showing that cooperation complements—not replaces—domestic space projects will help secure stakeholder support. The UK must mix realism with ambition, accepting necessary trade-offs now to secure a resilient, competitive future in Europe’s shared space ecosystem.

This policy briefing paper was produced by Dr Raúl González Muñoz, Lecturer in Space Economy and Space & Society Research lead for the University of Leicester Institute for Space, with the support of the University of Leicester Institute for Policy.



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