

Star wars

Opposition to using European space technology for military purposes is fading, **Eleni Courea** reports.

Europe has always taken an unusual approach to its space programmes. Unlike the United States, Russia or China, it has never seen itself as party to a military space race.

"Europe's model is one of collaboration over competition," says Jean-Jacques Tortora, director of the European Space Policy Institute, a Vienna-based think tank. As a result, programmes such as Galileo—the EU satellite navigation system—are entirely civilian, unlike the Global Positioning System (GPS)—the US equivalent—which is designed and operated by the US Air Force.

But a momentous shift in Europe's approach was heralded by a European Commission space strategy published in October 2016, which stated that space "reinforces Europe's role as a stronger global player and is an asset for its security and defence". In January, for the first time in its nine-year history, the EU space policy conference in Brussels was opened by the high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy.

The European Defence Agency, which has been working for years to strengthen EU cooperation on military technology, is drawing encouragement from these changes. Its chief executive Jorge Domecq says that his staff are already looking at how Galileo, for example, could be put to military use. This approach is not limited to the EDA. "The Commission itself has begun using the word 'military' when it considers Galileo's future applications," Tortora says, adding that the same goes for Copernicus, the EU's Earth observation system.

"The Commission has no mandate to follow such an approach," Tortora concedes, but adds that it would very much like one. "Not all European countries share the need or will to develop the military applications of space technologies. The Commission is working around their reservations by first developing space technologies and then saying, 'You know what, why not use them for military purposes?'"

This practice is unlikely to last much longer, Tortora says. For space programmes to be militarily effective, military needs must be considered at inception stage. "Military usage comes with security requirements, which can't be easily incorporated after the programme design is finalised."

Domecq says he would also like to see "defence considerations to be taken into account from the start as we design future space programmes". He adds that the EDA has begun "testing the will" for civil-military cooperation through the governmental satellite communications

system Govsatcom, which it administers jointly with the European Space Agency (ESA) and the Commission.

Govsatcom has been stuck at the discussion stage for years, as opponents cast it as a Commission attempt to take power over defence policy away from national governments. But Domecq says that a change in mood is inching the programme closer to realisation, and the EDA is preparing options to put to its steering board in May.

The EDA would also like to transform Galileo and Copernicus into 'dual-use' programmes, extending their use from navigation and the monitoring of earthquakes to targeting missiles and coordinating ground troops. This could strengthen links between ESA and the EU's defence and security instruments, including the EDA. Some argue that ESA's yearly budget should be increased from €5.3 billion and its composition altered to reflect its shift in focus.

However, a reorientation of European space policy towards military priorities will meet resistance. "I think the European Parliament should vehemently oppose this development," says Sabine Lösing, a German MEP from the Socialists and Democrats group. Opponents of the expansion of pan-European defence will argue that the EU was created to end war, not to refuel and redefine it. But general alarm at the unreliability of Donald Trump's administration in the US is likely to diminish such opposition. Lösing admits that, even before Trump was elected, most MEPs were ready to accept the militarisation of space. Last June, Parliament adopted a resolution stating that the EU's space capabilities should be used everywhere, from citizens' car navigation systems to "full-scale warfare".

Domecq also says he hopes that defence research will be included in the next research Framework programme. "There is a compelling case for Europe to invest as a whole in defence capabilities," he says. "But I think there will be a big discussion, because there are many other priorities on the table when it comes to distributing funds."

Domecq is certainly right about that. "Parliament is likely to say that although we don't oppose having a defence element, it must be paid for with additional funds," says Clare Moody, a UK socialist MEP.

Using the Framework programme for defence will be opposed by some researchers on moral grounds and by others because work undertaken for the military is likely to be confidential, and therefore unappealing. But the fact that the Parliament's main objection is budgetary speaks volumes. The firm opposition to investment in defence that gripped MEPs and some European governments for years is finally waning.

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