

"Space action at the heart of European strategic autonomy" - Speech by President Charles Michel at the 13th European Space Conference

It's a real pleasure to speak to you at the opening of this European Space Conference.

Many of you today play a crucial – and highly specialised – role in our European space policy. And we will hear from some of the most competent space policy experts, including my good friend Thierry Breton.

What I would like to do is to help put your efforts in the context of our overall strategy. Especially at this particular geopolitical moment. I hope this will shine a light on why our European space action – your action – is so important to reaching our strategic objectives.

Europe is a global power in space. But first and foremost, we are a global power full stop. Strong, united, committed. 2020 was a challenging and extraordinary year. But also a year that brought us together and made us stronger. Especially in three areas:

First, we decided to put our climate and digital transitions at the heart of our prosperity strategy.

Second, we decided to mobilise unprecedented means to achieve our ambitious goals.

And third, we committed to becoming more strategically autonomous.

Just as Copernicus - 'Europe's eyes on Earth' - sets global standards in space, the EU is setting global standards in climate action.

We committed to becoming the first carbon neutral continent by 2050. And just last month, we agreed to a decisive step by promising to reduce our carbon emissions by 55% by 2030. And with our Green Deal, we operationalise these targets and harness the vast economic potential of green innovations. We want to become the green world leader.

Our digital strategy is just as ambitious. We want to spearhead the digital revolution – that of data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. We possess the largest pool of industrial data in the world. Our European model – based on values and individual freedoms – can give us a competitive advantage over the other models in the world.

It's not enough to simply have goals. Goals without the means are just wishful thinking. That's why we have taken decisive action to deploy massive financial means to achieve our goals.

We agreed and confirmed a huge 1.8 trillion euro budget and recovery plan, financed by issuing European bonds. It will turbocharge our climate and digital transitions.

Finally, the European Union wants to grow stronger as a collective whole – not just the sum of individual countries. Stronger to better defend our values and interests in the world. This means building greater strategic autonomy. Less dependence, more influence. It means defending multilateral cooperation for a more open and fairer world. And leaving behind a certain naivety. It means twenty-seven countries unified behind a set of clear objectives.

Two very recent examples come to mind: our Brexit agreement with the UK; and our investment agreement with China. On Brexit, we stood firm and unified, right from the beginning. Access to our single market of 450 million consumers is only possible by respecting our standards and the rules of the game. On China, we are determined to rebalance our trade relationship and to achieve greater reciprocity. When ratified, our investment agreement will finally give our businesses access to markets previously closed to them.

We want to lead on climate and digital. And we want more strategic autonomy in an open and global environment.

So how is our European space action – your action – playing a key role in helping to achieve these goals?

First, our space policy – along with a strong and dynamic space sector – is essential to implementing our climate and digital strategies.

Copernicus is already a spectacular tool for monitoring and watching over our planet – offering the most accurate data of Planet Earth 24/7.

And in the digital domain, space communications are creating major new opportunities. Low earth orbit satellite projects, in particular, should allow us to develop broadband connectivity throughout Europe, a key to the success of our digital transition.

Second, in our new budgetary space programme we will spend 14,9 billion euro – a significant increase from our previous budget. This will help step up support for a space industrial base that's already highly competitive on private markets, with great potential for growth. From data to the Internet of Things, broadband, Earth observation and, of course, launch systems.

We are determined to do everything we can to support and facilitate access to financing in these fields, particularly for start-ups and SMEs. This is true for the space sector, and for the digital sector, which will boost the space economy.

Finally, space has a direct impact on our geopolitical goal of strategic autonomy. Europe is already a major player in space. If we want to be stronger and more self-confident on the global landscape, we must also be stronger in space. We must ensure safe, autonomous, reliable and affordable access to space. Of course, we are not alone. As competition in space increases, we need to use our weight as a global player to help build robust global governance. This will be essential to innovative and sustainable space activity. And how we manage space traffic and space debris will also be a challenge. Europe, as a leader in multilateral cooperation, has a key role to play in protecting the collective global interest.

Space also offers commercial challenges. Fair access to world markets will also be a global challenge. Europe must play a positive role in this area as well.

A robust European space sector is essential to a robust Europe.

Developing our space sector will help us reinforce our strategic autonomy – goal number one of our generation, in my view. This encompasses all our operational objectives. Your field – space – is set to grow at a phenomenal rate. And this will have an equally phenomenal impact on our strategic objective of greater autonomy. In the same way, Europe's strength and assertiveness on the global stage will help us create a favourable context for your energies, talents and innovations in the space sector.

The European Union was born of a dream. Today, that dream is a reality that must be constantly nurtured and strengthened. With determination and unity. We have proved this over the past year. And this dream must continue to push us towards greater ambition. Your field – the conquest of space – evokes our dreams, like no other. You are at the forefront of Europe's future – the new European dream. You can count on Europe to support you, just as Europe counts on you.

I wish you a productive and exciting conference. Thank you.

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