Europe needs a moment of reckoning on its space sector

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On August 19th, 2026, the Chinese company LandSpace landed its first reusable booster. LandSpace is the second Chinese company to successfully recover an orbital-class booster. China now joins the United States as the only country where multiple companies have demonstrated this capability. Even though Falcon 9 remains, for now, in a category of its ow (as the only system for which booster recovery and reuse are routine), these two summer landings mean that China will soon join the US in the next phase of space exploration. Indeed, these successes on reusability place China in the optimal position to be the real contender in the new space race, as forewarned 15 years ago by Elon Musk, especially at a moment when Musk's increasingly sprawling corporate empire is diverting capital and managerial attention towards enormously expensive bets on artificial intelligence.

Of course, in this era of geopolitical and military turmoil, it is quite likely that security will come first. As soon as rocket recovery and refly becomes routine, China is likely to scale up fast its own versions of Starlink, placing thousands of satellites in LEO in the next few years. It is worth reminding that new LEO constellations are inherently dual use, as shown by the war in Ukraine. If and when a Chinese Starlink equivalent becomes truly operational, it would be extraordinarily complacent for European security planners to assume that Russia could never obtain access to it, reverting the enormous damage done by the "Starlink disconnect" it suffered in early 2026.

Europe, meanwhile, lags desperately behind. While the world's true powers dash towards mass deployment, Europe stumbles to the point that its only credible reusable rocket company, MaiaSpace, was on the verge of running out of money in July 2026. The irony would be comic if the strategic consequences were not so serious: Europe's most credible reusable-launch project nearly ran out of money just as Chinese competitors were demonstrating the technology Europe had spent a decade explaining why it did not urgently need. MaiaSpace was eventually saved by its parent company, ArianeGroup, but it is still far from flying its first demonstrator, and probably years away from any operational orbital use. Other European space companies, like Augsburg Rocket Factory (RFA), are focusing instead on small, non-reusable launchers, which are both relatively expensive (at regime, the RFA-One rocket would cost more than twice a Falcon 9 per kg to orbit) and increasingly obsolete in the brave new era of cheap access and mega constellations.

For the continent that dominated 'cheap' space access in the late 2000s, this is a failure of epic proportions and of worrying security consequences, as we argued earlier this year. But European space elites have nothing else but themselves to blame. Ariane executives were deriding SpaceX reusable rockets more than a decade ago; ESA, Airbus and Arianespace executives have repeatedly argued against reusable rockets on several shifting grounds, from claiming that the technology was unproven

, to saying that it was too costly to refly, to arguing that cost savings were limited, to claiming that there was not enough demand to sustain reusable rockets, to even engaging on social media stating that reusability was overrated. Europe therefore remained paralysed while the rest of the world dashed forward.

In fact, this immobilist stance is convenient for incumbents, who do not have to engage in the risky business of actually investing shareholder money in innovation. ASD-Eurospace, the trade and lobbying association of the European space industry, has been more than happy to provide evidence over the years in justification of European immobilism, sometimes even using ad-hoc assumptions (e.g. excluding Starlink from calculations, even though it represents 60% of total satellites and more than 60% of global launches annually). The combined result of this persuasion exercise and of the poor decisions of incumbent European aerospace executives of the past 15 years is that Europe probably won't have a prototype reusable rocket operational before the end of this decade, and won't have a medium-sized reusable rocket before the end of the next — 25 years after the first Falcon 9 landing.

Granted, this story — dominant European companies scared of having to ask their shareholders for serious capital to pursue risky innovation, and preferring to construct instead a cushioned version of reality around themselves to justify immobilism— is not unique to the space sector. The automotive sector, another sector dominated by a few large incumbents, went through the same process and is now facing similar challenges. Telecommunications might be next, since their business will face very strong competition from ever-cheaper LEO constellations whose infrastructure scales globally.

It is not too late for Europe to get back in the race; in fact, our own security depends on it. But for that to happen, Europe needs first a 'structural break', a moment of reckoning with the mistakes of the past. We must face our problem, which is a problem of competition, inadequate élites, and frankly insufficient risk-taking by private actors.

And perhaps the first thing Europe needs to stop doing is confusing explanations for failure with excuses for it. China did not wait for reusable launch to become a mature, proven technology before pursuing it. SpaceX did not wait until every uncertainty surrounding reusability had been resolved before putting shareholders' money, rockets and reputations at risk. Innovation is precisely what happens before the outcome is certain.

For fifteen years, Europe's space establishment has repeatedly explained why the next technological leap was too uncertain, too expensive, insufficiently demanded, or simply unnecessary — only to discover, once somebody else had made it work, that Europe urgently needed it too. We cannot spend the next fifteen years doing the same with Starship, mass constellations, solar orbital infrastructure, and so on. A continent that only invests once the technological risk has disappeared is condemned to be dependent on the good wishes of the innovators. In a world where the rule of law is in global recession and technology is power, avoiding this should be everyone's priority.