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Norwegian-German space collaboration

A pathway to Europe

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Merz and Støre at Andøya: Strategic first visit to Norway

On the 13th of March 2026, Friedrich Merz visited Norway for the first time as Chancellor of Germany. Held at Andøya Spaceport in Northern Norway, it was a strategic choice for the first visit. Joined by the German Minister of Research and Space and Minister of Defence, Merz met his Norwegian colleagues: Prime Minister Gahr Støre and the Ministers of Trade and Defence. A clear message was underlined by the two leaders: the Norwegian and German space industries complement each other and, together, both countries can help Europe achieve its goal of reclaiming a competitive edge in the space sector. This cooperation can ramp up their joint defense capabilities, and, in fine, contributing to make the continent stronger and safer. The visit is a testament to the German belief that Norway should be incorporated in Europe's quest for strategic autonomy. In space, the comparative advantages are particularly clear: Where Germany brings industrial scale and technological breadth, Norway contributes with specialized expertise, research environments, and a unique geographic position for space activities in the High North.

The visit kicked off a new ambition for Norwegian-German cooperation in space, with a focus on space-based surveillance, secure satellite communication, and launch capabilities from the spaceport. It shows new signs of conceptualizing space as a highly cross-sectoral domain where capacity-building is needed. Partnership with Germany appears to offer major opportunities for Norway's position in the space domain in Europe. Why are we seeing this renewed bilateral cooperation now, what does it entail, and what are the possible implications for Norway's role in space in Europe?

Potential of bilateral partnerships

In 2024, Norway and Germany signed a Letter of Intent to further common space cooperation. Its intended mission was to lay the foundation for collaboration on space operations at large, with a focus on satellite launches from Andøya as well as

broader defense and technological cooperation in the space sector. In 2026, this was complemented by another defence agreement.

Germany released its new Space Safety and Security Strategy in 2025, backed by 35 billion euros in funding towards 2030. While the document emphasized deterrence, a clear shift in posture was announced in May 2026 at the SmallSat Europe Conference: Wolfgang Ohl, from the German Armed Forces, announced that the country would now pursue offensive space capabilities. Ohl stated that Germany also has started the work towards establishing a European Space Component under German leadership to prevent duplicating capacities. Another clear strategic priority is the focus on microlaunchers: over 90 percent of launches today are being provided for small satellites, but Germany and Europe at large lack such capabilities. For Germany, partnership with Norway also seeks to enable the rapid fielding of new capabilities in space, a concept known as responsive launch.

Access to space is a critical element within the partnership. Germany has no national spaceport, and previous attempts at building offshore pads have been temporarily scrapped, calling for alternatives. Andøya's infrastructure development and operational ramp-up could provide that much needed access. Germany is investing heavily in critical infrastructure, and Norway can open avenues through access to space and its Arctic and maritime operations.

Together, these developments highlight a European trend: attempting to strengthen autonomy amid global conflicts and uncertain transatlantic relations. Amid ongoing debates in the EU, Germany speaks for a part of the European community which believes this objective can be attained through close integration of third countries like Norway, rather than being exclusively a quest for EU-members. Within this newly found German ambition, spearheading European security and furthering Europe's position as a space power, Norway is presented as a like-minded partner and key enabler of the EU's ambitions.

From Norway's perspective, and while the specifics are still to be defined, a deepened partnership with an established space-faring nation could provide increased legitimacy in its ability to provide partners with trusted launch solutions. It also holds potential for future growth in its space infrastructure, augmenting European launch service capabilities and reducing dependence on non-European spaceports. If the collaboration between Isar Aerospace and Andøya proves fruitful, for example, the spaceport could become a reference for Arctic-based space operations.

Isar Aerospace, a German company currently leading the race in the small launch segment, has chosen Andøya as its anchor spaceport. Amid construction delays and regulatory hurdles at other European sites (SaxaVord, Sutherland), success from the German company could see Andøya gain commercial traction. In turn, Norway could become an attractive hub for space operations and foreign investments.

Now is Europe's moment

"We have relied for far too long on other launch systems and other nations around the world. This is the time for European cooperation. And not just the EU - the EU's cooperation should extend beyond its borders. Norway should be part of this cooperation", Merz said during his visit. Against the backdrop of the U.S. national security strategy, Merz underscored the need for Europe to be self-reliant. The extent to which European security can be built around the assumption of U.S. security guarantees has indeed eroded during Trump's second term. Paired with the war in Ukraine, it has heightened the issue of dependence in times of crises and made the issue of autonomy a prominent topic in the foundation of European engagement in space. Notably, the uncertainty around continued access to external providers like SpaceX, and the subsequent capacity gap, has heightened concerns about dependence on the U.S. also in space.

As seen by its budgetary contributions, further engagement with Europe on space remains on top of Norway's agenda. The focus on bilateral partnerships, together with closer cooperation with the EU, is part of a Norwegian hedging strategy as a reaction to a relationship with the U.S. defined by unpredictability. The strategy gives priority to the fostering of closer cooperation with allies like Germany, France, the UK and the Nordic countries, reinforcing the foundation that underpins Norwegian security.

However, while working with Germany promises increased investments and deeper cooperation with Europe, Norway's integration in the EU's programmes and activities remain unclear. And while working with the U.S. - despite the misalignment and unreliability - could provide rapid development of capabilities built on a long-standing defense partnership, the EU has communicated that deepened cooperation with the U.S. in space could

compromise closer Norwegian integration in its own space activities. Together, both tracks form a foreign policy dilemma, and its outcome will determine Norway's approach to future cooperation in space.

Norway and Germany both see decreasing U.S.' commitments in Europe as a reason to pave new avenues for European collaboration in space. Notably, although many of Norway's satellite-based defence and intelligence needs are being met through close cooperation with the U.S., there's a certain level of concern as to the country's long-term reliability in the joint conduct of other space operations.

Coordinated efforts for joint success

The visit to Andøya defined how the work between the two countries will materialize: a working group was put together to set forth a plan to structure the work ahead. Its mandate is to facilitate partnership in areas of critical importance to European security and preparedness, such as space-based intelligence, secure satellite communications and enhancing launch capacity at Andøya Spaceport. Tasked by the two Heads of State, relevant ministries and institutions are gathering in this working group to produce fast results.

This space-focused collaboration is unique in the way it has been granted high priority by both governments and engaged heads of state and relevant ministers efficiently. The working group dedicated to coordinating the effort is led by both Heads of States' Offices, a new characteristic for Norwegian engagement in space. This high political priority has stressed the needs for coordination across all parties from the beginning. For Norway, this means breaking down silos at ministry-level, where space was traditionally handled according to the relevant value it provides, and with diverging levels of priority, resources and capacity. A higher acknowledgement of space as a cross-sectoral domain will, if sustained, help with national capacity-building and lead to its consideration as an integral part of Norwegian foreign and security policy.

The partnership can enable Germany access to critical services ranking high on the political agenda. For Norway, deepening collaboration with the biggest European state investor in defense and space can exemplify a pathway towards future European cooperation. Yet, this ambition won't materialize without barriers.

The final boss: The EU

Renewed cooperation must account for an important factor: Germany is an EU member, whereas Norway is not. While Germany fosters various bilateral relations, they cannot be considered separately from the developments and decision-making processes occurring within the EU. In the EU, space is a shared competence under the TFEU, where Member States can act freely, provided their bilateral agreements do not violate EU regulations or limitations within the internal market. The Norwegian-German agreement is highly coordinated with the EU, as any EU Member State's bilateral effort is. A dependent factor of how successful or autonomous the partnership can be is therefore how independently it can progress before activities fall under the EU framework and consequent restrictions apply. Therefore, there is a level of uncertainty connected to the relations' level of independence from EU.

The proposal for the EU's next MFF indicates that third-country participation in the EU's space activities will require separate agreements beyond the framework of the EEA Agreement. Launch capacity, highlighted as one of the three key areas within the Norwegian-German partnership, might not be granted to third countries without further negotiations. Current drafts for the European Competitiveness Fund proposal indicate an EU-preference for launch capacities in the Space Programme for 2028-2034. The same preference can apply to other components in the proposal, but it is not clear how this will be defined and how it will affect Norway. Similarly, if Norway is treated as a third country under the EU Space Act, Andøya Spaceport would have to be registered, recognised as equivalent, or covered by a derogation. This would create regulatory hurdles and may indirectly favour launch sites inside the Union. Andøya therefore illustrates how the Act could produce exclusionary effects for closely integrated non-EU partners.

The discussion about European preference and third countries can have direct implications for joint industry ventures, which can materialize as practical limits for cooperation. As mentioned in the first Space Security Strategy of the German government, Germany has for objective to jointly build capabilities and resilience based on existing collaborative projects in the space sector, like Isar Aerospace and Andøya. Where Isar qualifies as an EU company that can partake in the capacity-building for EU's access to space, its anchor launch site, Andøya, can be a third-country area outside of the EU-preference priority.

For the EU, however, the strategic importance of the Arctic region is increasing rapidly, for military purposes, economic development and space activities. Norway holds a unique position as a space nation in the Arctic, thanks in part to KSAT's ground station infrastructure on Svalbard and Andøya's polar orbits' offering. Together, this makes Norway a strategic partner for the EU, one that it needs. On the other end, Norway can leverage this strategic offering to secure broader access to European space cooperation.

However, Norway's capabilities in the North do not translate into an automatic advantage. Several countries, like Sweden and Canada, are positioning themselves to play a larger role in Arctic space infrastructure, with competition for launch services and ground stations intensifying. Norway can leverage its partnership with Germany as a seal of confidence and ability to deliver space-related services and follow through with a whole-of-government approach in building this image globally.

Norway should have the ambition of becoming the world's leading space nation in the Arctic, building on its natural advantages, world-class infrastructure and established expertise, and this objective must be supported both politically and financially to clearly signal its intentions to international partners. Without a clear ambition backed by resources and capabilities to match it, Norway risks losing an advantage in its collaboration with Germany and the EU that has taken decades to build.

What comes next?

To sustain a fruitful partnership between Norway and Germany in space, several considerations should be outlined. Given current geopolitical tensions, patchy transatlantic security guarantees, and an increasingly complex framework for third-country participation in the EU's Space Programme 2028-2034 and the EU's space market, partnership with Germany should consider the following:

1. The Norwegian-German Working Group should maintain a clear roadmap, considering barriers and ways to overcome them, to ensure the partnership does not fall short in considering both the opportunities and challenges of having a non-EU member and an EU member collaborate on space capabilities. It should especially address how to find ways around the practice of "EU preference" and the incorporation of third countries to enable strong, future cooperation.

2. While the scale of Germany's investment can't be matched, the Norwegian government should, to avoid becoming a junior partner in this partnership and to create interdependencies, guarantee long-term investment to show commitment, build capacity and inspire confidence.

3. Norwegian authorities need to clarify and optimize the regulatory framework for launches at Andøya to prevent hurdles in bilateral and international collaboration. This entails bureaucracy reactivity, resources for prompt licensing handling, and a willingness to grant space activities the level of priority they need to work as a Norwegian pathway for deeper European collaboration.

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