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THE AFTERMATH ON EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OF THE GATEKEEPING POWER
OF U.S. BIG PRIVATE SPACE CORPORATIONS.

Abstract

The concept of power when assessing private actors in the space market is often misused. Starting from the early 2010s, a limited number of companies domiciliated in the US gained extensive power in the global New Space ecosystem. How is their power definable? How does it affect European strategic autonomy in Space? The paper answers these questions and fills the gap in the definition of power of space private corporations in the New Space ecosystem. It argues that the power that some specific New Space corporations acquired falls under the definition of gatekeeping power, transposing to the New Space market the concept used in Digital Markets Act enacted by the European Commission to identify digital industries and services disturbing a fair and contestable market competition in the European Union. First, the paper explores the enabling conditions for gatekeeping power in US Space companies, necessary to fully understand the resulting power. The analysis of the case of SpaceX showcases that i) the deeply rooted hands-off interpretative approach of US antitrust law allowed its horizontal and vertical integration with other markets, while ii) the neoliberal orientation of US Space policies brought to the innovative US procurement methodologies. These two enabling conditions allowed the crystallization of power in the hands of specific Space corporations. To accurately showcase this power, the paper focuses on the case of SpaceX. The company is analysed according to gatekeeping power standards to the New Space global market. Specifically, SpaceX's is qualitatively investigated in its market size, its market share for the case of launchers - inside and outside of the Union market - its horizontal and vertical integration with other global markets, and other structural behaviors. The overall conclusion on gatekeeping power is that it is an advantage built in some companies in entering - and craft brand new - markets by leveraging on economic structures that privilege the status quo. Lastly, the paper critically explores the main concern that US gatekeepers pose to European strategic and political autonomy in Space. While raising barriers to the fair establishment of European companies in their markets, they make it difficult for European governmental and commercial customers to cultivate their industrial autonomy. At the same time, they also become a flagship tool of foreign policy in their housing countries and, by that, the political dependence of Europe on foreign countries is heavily enhanced.