

On January 24th, the Director of the Foundation for Strategic Research, Xavier Pasco, addressed the first thematic conference of the 2022 cycle dedicated to the "transformations of the international spatial landscape and their strategic consequences", in the Oury auditorium of the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. His work is mainly focused on space affairs, the United States' international spatial strategy, as well as on European space policy. He notably advises several national and European bodies, such as the European Defence Agency, the European Commission or the Prime Minister's office (Centre d'Analyse Stratégique).

His assessment is clear: space is quickly moving towards democratisation. The frontier of the space adventure, the Moon, has now been displaced with the missions to Mars. The stakeholders involved in space are multiplying and diversifying at an explosive rate. The field of space, originally restricted to great powers such as the United States, Russia, China, Japan, and France, now comprises a hundred or so states and various private companies, including Elon Musk's SpaceX. This hybrid supply, which is enshrined in the growing involvement of the private sector in space, raises certain concerns. These apprehensions are compounded by the complexity of regulating space traffic and of establishing clear governance. The 1967 international treaty on the Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space appears to be obsolete and already bypassed in that regard.

The scene has indeed evolved considerably. Between 2015 and 2020, 87 launches were recorded, against 146 since the outset of 2021, including 56 for China and 45 for the United States. Xavier Pasco stresses three aspects to be considered as imperative for the handling of the space field as of now: exploration, logistics, and militarisation. Space is a hostile environment, difficult to access and challenging to operate in due to its physical constraints. X. Pasco emphasises that the nature of the spatial environment requires interdependence. States are all concerned by the potential repercussions of space-related activities.

From a financial standpoint, space has become inevitable; all nations are now required to invest in it as it constitutes a showcase for competition between powers. The FRS director deepens his analysis by recalling that "interest in Space was born in an era of bipolar power relations". The US-USSR standoff propelled space to the forefront of geopolitical and economic agendas in the second half of the 20th century. Post-1989, the US foothold in space enabled it to forge a connection between space and information, which resulted in the first penetration of the private sector in spatial activities in 1994, with the liberalisation of satellite imagery. The first space-related commercial activities were wholly organised; according to Mr Pasco, the foundations of what is referred to as the 'New Space' were sown.

The involvement of private players, such as SpaceX since 2001, remains in line with the interests of the US government. Contrary to popular belief, most of the investment in the space sector is public, controlled by an American layer system, intertwining the public with the private.

X. Pasco also points out that the race to Mars is a new symbolic and scientific frontier. However, another tangible political and economic issue is the conquest of the Moon; where else can we project ourselves? Mars is hardly habitable. For the next three decades, lunar programmes will be a mobilisation objective for states, especially for the United States and China, but also for private investors.

To conclude, Xavier Pasco emphasised that the stakes involved in space are strategic and will remain dominated by both competition and the interests of states in collaboration with private players which will multiply and diversify. Given its level of access constraints and the common stakes for humanity of its exploitation, cooperation and interdependence are imperative in space. Nevertheless, space will be to the 21st century what nuclear power was to the 20th, a reflection of state power and competitiveness.