

Attack from space: Europe studies precision orbital weapons to strike anywhere in less than an hour

Published on 19/11/2026

From the science fiction of "rods from God" to German industrial reality: ATMOS Space Cargo and MBDA Deutschland are joining forces on the PODS program. A technological leap that promises hypersonic speeds and strategic sovereignty, but raises major questions over cost, vulnerability, and global stability.

Europe is turning its gaze toward low Earth orbit, and no longer solely for telecommunications, navigation, or weather observation. **November 18, 2026** marks a potential turning point in the military doctrine of the Old Continent: German space company **ATMOS Space Cargo** and defense giant **MBDA Deutschland** have announced a **cooperation agreement to explore the development of space-based conventional weapons systems**. The project, dubbed **PODS (Precision Orbital Deep Strike)**, aims to combine **commercial orbital transportation** with the most advanced **atmospheric reentry technologies** to strike targets

on Earth with surgical precision directly from space.

How the PODS concept works: the "silver bullet" weapon

The idea behind PODS is as radical as it is ambitious: **placing conventional warheads in low Earth orbit (LEO, between 160 and 2,000 kilometers in altitude)**, keeping them on standby until an engagement order is issued. Once the command is activated, a reentry capsule would release the payload — which could consist of **pure kinetic penetrators** or **advanced guided munitions** — sending it plunging through the atmosphere at **extreme hypersonic speeds**.

According to a statement by ATMOS CEO Sebastian Klaus, the operational goal is to create a system capable of reaching **any target on the planet in less than 60 minutes**.This would not be an area-saturation weapon, but rather a niche capability—a genuine **"silver bullet" designed to neutralize targets of the highest strategic value or those extremely time-sensitive**, where traditional subsonic cruise missiles or even future ground-launched hypersonic systems would take too long to arrive or would be easily intercepted by modern air defenses.

From Cold War myth to dual-use technology

Although the idea of bombing Earth from space has its roots in the Cold War — from the Soviet *FOBS* (Fractional Orbital Bombardment System), recently revived by China as well, to the well-known American studies on "*Rods from God*" (tungsten rods dropped from orbit) — the European approach stems from an **unprecedented synergy between the commercial New Space sector and the traditional missile industry**.

ATMOS Space Cargo has already demonstrated the effectiveness of its **Inflatable Atmospheric Decelerator (IAD)** with the Phoenix capsule mission, originally designed to return scientific experiments and materials produced in microgravity to Earth. However, the **Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022** accelerated the search for defense applications. The involvement of **MBDA** now brings crucial expertise in **terminal guidance, warhead integration, and the management of extreme flight profiles**, bridging the vast engineering gap between recovering a scientific payload and striking a protected military target after passing through the plasma of atmospheric re-entry.

Critical issues: physics, costs, and vulnerabilities

Despite industry enthusiasm, the operational and economic feasibility of the PODS program remains to be proven. **Orbital mechanics imposes severe constraints**: a satellite travels at approximately **28,000 kilometers per hour**, but its trajectory is constrained by the orbit's inclination. To ensure an attack window of less than one hour anywhere on the globe, a few individual vehicles would not suffice; a **constellation of dozens of capsules ready for re-entry** would be required, with **astronomical launch, maintenance, and replacement costs**.

Added to this is the **survivability paradox**.While a weapon in orbit is safe from conventional preemptive attacks on the ground and is **almost impossible to intercept during the terminal phase of atmospheric descent**, low-Earth-orbit satellites follow **predictable trajectories that can be easily tracked by enemy radar**. In a high-intensity conflict, these platforms would become priority targets for **anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons**, which Russia and China have already extensively developed and tested.

European sovereignty and the new space arms race

From a legal and geopolitical perspective, the European initiative is navigating treacherous ground. The **1967 Outer Space Treaty** explicitly prohibits placing nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction in orbit, but **does not categorically ban conventional weapons**. However, the militarization of space is accelerating sharply worldwide: from the space-based interceptors planned for the future American *Golden Dome* shield to Chinese and Russian orbital experiments, ethical and strategic restraints have steadily eroded.

The greatest risk concerns **strategic stability**: for an outside observer, **distinguishing a commercial capsule intended for research from an armed vehicle ready to re-enter the atmosphere within minutes could prove impossible**, increasing the risk of miscalculation and diplomatic crises.

Nevertheless, the political message sent by Berlin and European industry is unequivocal. As ATMOS and MBDA executives have emphasized, **control of orbital transportation and atmospheric re-entry represents the new tier of strategic infrastructure**. In a world where **defense autonomy** can no longer be postponed, Europe has decided that its technological sovereignty must also extend to the stars.

News link: https://www.twz.com/space/europe-is-exploring-orbital-deep-strike-weapons