

**Table Stakes or Takeover?**  
**Starlink Mobile, Amazon Leo, and the Future of Europe's Mobile Operators**  
**13 September 2026**

**Disclaimer – Caveat:** **First**, this topic is moving so fast that there is very little peer-reviewed academic literature on the *competitive* dynamics yet; the scholarly D2D literature (3GPP Release 17/18/19 NTN specifications, IEEE papers on LEO link budgets) covers the technology, not the market structure, so the market analysis outlined in this document rests on trade press, earnings calls, and sell-side research. **Second**, several of the most important primary documents are not public: the T-Mobile/SpaceX exclusivity contract, the full BofA and Bernstein notes (client-only), and the Charter/Verizon MVNO terms, everything about those comes through secondary reporting (Bloomberg, FT) as flagged. **Third**, our summary and outlook, the "Amazon Prime Connect" scenario (section 7.2.), the dual-sourcing warning (section 7.2.), the "SpaceX two narratives" framing (section 8), are our own analysis built on these sources, not something one can find stated in any of them; the Amazon-competing-with-its-customers pattern is well documented in the retail and AWS context, but its extension to connectivity is our assessment.

## 1. Executive Summary

Starlink Mobile's declared entry into the consumer mobile market — backed since August 2026 by an explicit commitment to build terrestrial infrastructure — poses the most serious structural challenge to mobile network operators (MNOs) in two decades. This paper, the third in our series, examines two dimensions the US-centric debate tends to neglect: the outside-US (European, etc.) perspective, and the competitive role of Amazon Leo.

Europe's position differs structurally from the situation in the US, and regulation is its real moat. The European Commission's May 2026 decision on the 2 GHz MSS band — a comparative selection process with block caps, a one-third limit for non-EU operators, and one-third reserved for state use integrated with IRIS<sup>2</sup> — explicitly forecloses the spectrum-acquisition route through which SpaceX gained US market entry. A direct-to-consumer Starlink Mobile offering in Europe is effectively blocked this decade. The designated commercial counterweight is *Satellite Connect Europe* (formerly SatCo), the Vodafone/AST SpaceMobile joint venture, whose carrier-friendly architecture, operating on the MNOs' own spectrum, makes it structurally incapable of bypassing operators. Whether its 50/50 ownership with Texas-based AST satisfies the "European entity" test remains unclear.

Yet Europe is in some respects more vulnerable than the US: fragmented operators lack the scale to fund satellite, 6G, and fiber simultaneously; roaming revenue is disproportionately exposed to any global satellite plan; thin margins leave little headroom for a capex-intensive

response; and Deutsche Telekom sits on both sides of the sovereignty divide. Europe's real risk is therefore not customer loss but the slow scenario: satellite D2D becomes a wholesale layer every operator must rent — "table stakes"<sup>1</sup> — commoditizing operators from above. The decisive question is not "Will Starlink take our customers?" but "Who owns the satellite layer we will all depend on, and does renting it turn us into utilities?"

Amazon Leo's entry, meanwhile, is stabilizing rather than disruptive in the current configuration. The D2D market is bifurcating into two camps: SpaceX as vertically integrated aggressor seeking the end-customer relationship, and Amazon as deliberately neutral wholesale supplier behind carriers, behind Apple, and bundled with AWS. This restores MNO bargaining power and validates the partner model. One risk lurks in the background: Amazon, with direct billing relationships to hundreds of millions of Prime households, is of all players the best positioned to execute disintermediation should it ever choose to. Leo's entry delays potential MNO disruption; it does not prevent it. The 2 GHz award and the Satellite Connect Europe ownership resolution over the next twelve months will matter more for Europe than anything said on a SpaceX earnings call.

## 2. Introduction

This document is a follow-up to earlier papers on the same topic - *Starlink Mobile's consumer market entry and its impact on MNOs* (V1, 6 July and V2, 27 August). This article examines the competitive role of Amazon Leo from a perspective outside the United States—primarily from a European viewpoint—although much of it is also relevant to markets outside Europe.

Compared to the situation in North America, the landscape in Europe differs structurally in almost every respect, particularly about the highly fragmented operator structure relative to North America. As we will explain in this paper, some of these differences protect European operators better than their American peers, while others put them at greater risk.

The potential impact of Starlink and Amazon Leo's satellite-based services—both on retail and at the wholesale level—represents a complex interplay of technology, sovereignty aspirations, competitive dynamics, and geopolitical factors. In this context, we should keep in mind the famous quote often attributed to hockey legend Wayne Gretzky: "*Skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.*" With this article, we aim to help decipher possible developments and anticipate courses of action for the various players involved, to better assess "where the puck is going."

## 3. Regulation is Europe's real moat and Brussels just used it

The decisive event came in May 2026: the European Commission decided [22] how to allocate the 2 GHz MSS band, the highly valuable spectrum for D2D services, currently held by EchoStar and Viasat with licenses expiring in May 2027, via a comparative selection process rather than

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<sup>1</sup> "Table stakes" is a poker term: the minimum buy-in one needs just to sit at the table. In business strategy jargon it means a capability that doesn't win customers, but whose *absence* loses them. In other words, a baseline requirement for competing at all, as opposed to a differentiator that allows an operator to charge more.

auction, with operators capped at a 2x10 MHz block and non-EU operators limited to one-third of the available frequencies. One-third is reserved outright for EU state use, security and military integrated with IRIS<sup>2</sup>, the EU's 290-satellite sovereign governmental satellite constellation (with a secondary commercial component), often loosely (and partly misleading) described as "Europe's answer to Starlink". For more details see **Annex 1**. Crucially, EchoStar cannot sell its EU 2 GHz license to SpaceX; SpaceX must compete on the open commercial block like everyone else. In other words: the exact maneuver that gave SpaceX its US terrestrial spectrum (\$19.6B for EchoStar's licenses) is explicitly blocked in Europe. SpaceX is not amused and some of its executives accused EC regulators of dividing the spectrum into "virtually unusable sub-divided parts" and warned that reserving spectrum for IRIS<sup>2</sup> could leave Europe without a globally competitive D2D service. But the direction is clear: there will be no Starlink Mobile going direct-to-consumer in Europe on its own spectrum this decade. The final allocation gets decided politically, as [one analysis put it](#), the 2 GHz fight will be decided by which version of sovereignty wins more votes in Strasbourg or Brussels, not by engineering.

#### 4. Europe is building its own champion (with an ownership and control caveat)

The designated sovereign alternative is "[Satellite Connect Europe](#)" (formerly SatCo)", the Luxembourg-based Vodafone/AST SpaceMobile joint venture, which will wholesale D2D services to European operators. It has drawn interest from operators in 21 EU member states and is the logical lead candidate for the EU-reserved 2 GHz block. Vodafone's CEO pitched it explicitly as "*a sovereign satellite solution to the whole of Europe.*" [26] However, it remains to be seen, whether the 50/50 ownership structure with Texas-based AST technically makes **Satellite Connect Europe a European company** under the Brussels proposal, requiring an ownership adjustment to qualify for the protected block. For more details see **Annex 2**.

#### 5. Areas where Europe is even more vulnerable

- First, **fragmentation cuts both ways**. Yes, national spectrum control means SpaceX would need dozens of separate regulatory approvals to go direct, which is a huge barrier. But fragmentation also means European operators lack the scale and margins of the US Big Three. An average European MNO serving 5-15 million subscribers in one country has far less capacity to fund its own satellite layer, 6G, and fiber simultaneously than Verizon does. That's why almost all of them will end up *renting* the satellite layer either from [Satellite Connect Europe](#) (formerly known as SatCo) if sovereignty wins, or from Starlink if capability wins. But renting the coverage layer is the first step toward the "dumb pipe" scenario. The wholesale D2D model arriving in Europe (one satellite layer, many national operators on top) is precisely the structure that commoditizes the operators.
- Second, the **roaming exposure is asymmetric**. European operators earn meaningfully from intra-EU and international roaming and from serving travelers; a global satellite plan (whoever offers it) hits that revenue pool harder in Europe than in the continental US, where most people rarely leave their carrier's footprint.

- Third, **low prices in Europe are a double-edged sword**. In markets where consumers pay 10 to 20 euros per month thanks to competition among four providers and regulation, a new provider in the satellite-hybrid sector has little room to lower prices; in other words, the “[Jio moment](#)” has already occurred due to competition from terrestrial providers. But those same thin margins mean European operators have the least financial headroom to respond if the game shifts to capex-heavy hybrid networks.
- Fourth, from a European perspective the **complication surrounding Deutsche Telekom (DT)** deserves attention. DT is simultaneously Europe’s largest network operator, a partner of Starlink through its majority stake in T-Mobile US, and, according to reports that the CEO of T-Mobile declined to comment on (see DT/T-Mobile box below), in negotiations regarding a potential merger with T-Mobile valued at approximately 300 billion US dollars.<sup>2</sup> In the sovereignty debate, DT is effectively on both sides: its US subsidiary is Starlink’s closest ally, while its home continent is pursuing an anti-Starlink strategy. The way DT balances its interests in the 2-GHz band, Satellite Connect Europe, and its relationship with SpaceX will significantly shape the power balance in Europe.

**Proposed merger between Deutsche Telekom and T-Mobile US.** The news broke on April 21 and 22, 2026: [Fierce Network was the first to report](#) that Deutsche Telekom was considering a full merger with T-Mobile US, and Reuters reported that the two companies were in preliminary talks about a mega-merger, though both Deutsche Telekom and T-Mobile declined to comment; such a transaction would surpass the \$202.7 billion Vodafone-Mannesmann deal as the largest merger of all time to date, with DT valued at approximately \$166 billion and T-Mobile at approximately \$218 billion. In its reporting, Bloomberg described the proposed structure: a holding company that would control the operations of both firms and be jointly owned by their current investors.

**The moment when “no comment” was issued.** This comes from T-Mobile’s earnings call for the first quarter of 2026 on April 28 and 29. Two media outlets reported on this directly. Broadband Breakfast reported that Gopalan did not comment on the merger reports and stated that the company does not comment on rumors, “*and there would be nothing to comment on anyway,*” noting that such a deal would require separate approval by disinterested shareholders, “*what many of you refer to as the majority of the minority.*” Data Center Dynamics provided the more detailed quote: “*As a general rule, we do not comment on market rumors or speculation, and there is nothing concrete on which we could comment anyway ... The article has raised many questions about corporate governance.*” The main sources are:

- [Reuters](#), “Deutsche Telekom and T-Mobile in Initial Talks About Mega-Merger, Sources Say,” April 22, 2026 (also reported by [Yahoo Finance](#) and other outlets)
- [Fierce Network](#), “Deutsche Telekom Seeks Full Merger with T-Mobile US,” April 21, 2026
- [Broadband Breakfast](#), “T-Mobile CEO: No Comment on Merger Rumors with Deutsche Telekom,” April 29, 2026

<sup>2</sup> Different media outlets have attached different valuations to the deal, and the more commonly reported figure in recent coverage is around \$300 billion. However, the specific number should be treated as fluid.

- [Data Center Dynamics \(DCD\)](#), “T-Mobile Remains Tight-lipped on Reports of a Merger with Deutsche Telekom as First-Quarter Revenue Grows 10%,” May 1, 2026

**As of this writing, the situation is still in flux:** When we began drafting this article, the merger was still on the table. Since then, however, it has run into serious trouble: [Semafor reported](#) on July 31 that T-Mobile US executives had informed Deutsche Telekom that they would no longer support the planned merger. They cited concerns from shareholders and regulatory authorities, including indications that [CFIUS](#) would likely demand guarantees that T-Mobile’s U.S. revenues would remain in the country.

A more [recent Reuters report \(3 September 2026\)](#) add that Elliott Investment Management has built up a stake in Deutsche Telekom specifically to oppose the merger, that a full merger would reduce the combined stake held by the German government and KfW from about 28% to around 17%, which falls below the 25% blocking minority under German corporate law, and that the new holding company would likely be established outside Germany, possibly in Ireland, making the matter as much a political issue in Germany as it is a telecommunications policy one. The deal requires approval from 75% of shareholders, and support is dwindling.

**As for our strategic considerations**, one interesting aspect endures despite the deal’s difficulties: The episode confirmed just how central T-Mobile US and its Starlink partnership are to Deutsche Telekom’s overall equation, and the objections to the merger on grounds of German sovereignty align precisely with the dynamics of European sovereignty that we addressed in other contexts. During the second-quarter T-Mobile US earnings call, Gopalan for the first time provided hard numbers on satellite usage: it was at 0.0002% of network traffic (0.0003% at summer peak), a number strongly supporting the complement thesis.

## 6. Our Overall Assessment from an outside US (i.e., European, etc.) vantage point

The *direct cannibalization* scenarios (Starlink Mobile as consumer carrier, OEM global plans) are substantially less likely outside the US than in the US; For example, in Europe the regulatory architecture, spectrum caps, sovereignty politics, and the post-2022 wariness of Musk-controlled infrastructure (Ukraine taught European governments that lesson vividly) all point the same way. What Europe faces instead is the *slower* scenario: satellite D2D is being introduced as a wholesale layer that every operator must acquire, whether they like it or not; it will become the “table stakes”, as Gopalan put it, reduce disparities in roaming and in rural areas, and accelerate the consolidation debate that Brussels has been resisting for fifteen years. The crucial question facing Europe is not, “*Will Starlink take our customers away from us?*” but rather, “*Who owns the satellite infrastructure that we will all depend on, and will renting it turn us into utilities?*” The 2 GHz award process and the Satellite Connect Europe ownership resolution over the next 12 months are where that gets decided; **for anyone in Europe following this strategically, those two proceedings matter more than anything Shotwell (President and COO SpaceX) says on an earnings call.**

One **caveat on timing**: the sovereign alternative must work. AST's constellation buildout depends on launch availability (including Blue Origin's delayed New Glenn), and its planned ~60 satellites by end-2026 is modest against Starlink's thousands. If Satellite Connect Europe slips badly while Starlink's V2 D2C service demonstrably works in 2027, the political consensus for keeping the superior service out could erode fast. Experience shows that sovereignty arguments survive only until the capability gap gets embarrassing.

**T-Mobile/AT&T/Verizon spectrum-pooling JV**: During T-Mobile's Q2 earnings call (July 23, 2026) [T-Mobile CEO Srinu Gopalan](#) highlighted the company's satellite-focused **spectrum-pooling JV with rivals AT&T and Verizon**. The carrier's two rivals notably have their own separate partnerships with AST SpaceMobile. With this JV, the US incumbents are building joint buyer power against satellite suppliers; this is exactly the structural response our European "who owns the layer" question calls for, and an obvious template for non-US (European and other) operators.

## 7. Amazon Leo's Market Entry

**Amazon Leo** is in many ways an interesting entrant precisely because it's **playing a completely different game than SpaceX** and its impact on telcos is, at least in the current configuration, closer to stabilizing than disruptive. Its **market entry impacts both Starlink and incumbent telcos**.

### 7.1. Leo vs. Starlink - a real gap, but a misleading scoreboard

In purely numerical terms, the comparison seems unbalanced. Amazon Leo had deployed just under 400 satellites as of early July, against Starlink's ~10,900 in orbit. Amazon will foreseeably fall far short of its original FCC milestone of 1,618 satellites by July 30, 2026, projecting only around 700 by that date, which is why it filed for a 24-month extension citing rocket shortages and manufacturing ramp-up challenges. The FCC granted the extension on the 50% milestone while keeping the 2029 full-deployment deadline. Commercial service, originally targeted for mid-2026, has slipped to "later this year." Starlink meanwhile serves 10+ million customers across 150+ countries and generates over \$11 billion annually. And there's a structural handicap that won't go away: Amazon doesn't own its rockets. It has contracted over 100 launches across five vehicle types from four providers — the largest commercial launch procurement in history — including, awkwardly, buying additional Falcon 9 launches from its direct competitor. SpaceX's vertical integration in launch is a permanent cost and cadence advantage.

But the scoreboard misleads because Amazon isn't trying to win Starlink's game. Three things define its actual strategy. First, it's enterprise- and infrastructure-led: the beta launched with Verizon, AT&T, Vodafone, JetBlue, and NASA as partners, terminals go up to 1 Gbps for enterprise users, and the natural bundle is AWS offering satellite connectivity as an extension of cloud infrastructure for logistics, maritime, aviation, government, and IoT. These services are sold through the same established enterprise channels. Second, it bought its way into D2D rather than building from scratch: the ~\$11.6 billion Globalstar acquisition (expected to close in 2027) brings licensed global MSS spectrum, ground infrastructure, and most importantly

Apple as an anchor customer. Third, the July FCC filing for a 5,105-satellite D2D constellation designed around serving iPhones shows the model: Amazon wants to be the connectivity layer *behind* other people's brands. Its Gen 2 approval in February (roughly 4,500 additional satellites, bringing total authorization to ~7,740) gives it room to scale into that role.

**To sum up**, the right frame isn't "can Leo catch Starlink"; in consumer broadband it can't, for years. It's that the D2D market is bifurcating into two camps: SpaceX as the vertically integrated aggressor that now openly wants the end-customer relationship, and Amazon Leo as the deliberately neutral wholesale/infrastructure supplier that wants everyone else's end-customer relationships to run over its network. Amazon's pitch to carriers and OEMs is essentially: *we will never compete with you for your subscriber! The other guy just told his investors he will.* Following Shotwell's remarks in August, this pitch almost writes itself.

## 7.2. Impact on the established telecommunications industry

**Mostly good news, with a risk lurking in the background:** In the near and medium term, Amazon Leo's entry strengthens telcos rather than weakening them, for reasons that follow directly from the scenarios outlined earlier.

The advent of **Amazon Leo helps restore MNOs bargaining power**. The nightmare version of the wholesale-dependence problem — "renting your coverage layer turns you into a utility" — is far worse under a satellite monopoly than a duopoly. With Amazon Leo operational, AT&T and Verizon (both already beta partners) have a viable alternative to relying on SpaceX; European operators get an alternative to both Satellite Connect Europe and Starlink; and wholesale D2D pricing gets competed down. Every mobile network operator CFO should want Amazon Leo to succeed regardless of whether they ever use it.

This validates the partner model over the direct model. Amazon's revealed strategy — wholesale to carriers, backend for Apple, enterprise via AWS — is a large, well-capitalized player voting that the *complement* thesis is the right business model, not the cannibalization thesis. Srini Gopalan (T-Mobile US CEO): *"For us, it's clear that with time, this is no longer going to be a differentiation. It's going to be table stakes as a complementary service to have satellite along with your cellular service."* [17]. That makes the industry equilibrium more stable: OEMs and carriers who want satellite features no longer face a choice between "deal with Musk" and "nothing," which paradoxically reduces the pressure on anyone to make desperate strategic moves.

It partially neutralizes the OEM scenario. As described in our earlier paper, Apple choosing to sell its Globalstar stake to Amazon rather than build its own constellation was the clearest evidence against this scenario ("Scenario 2" in our earlier paper). Amazon absorbing Globalstar cements that: Apple's satellite roadmap now runs through a supplier whose incentive is to keep Apple as a customer, not to help Apple become a carrier.

However, it must be made very clear that **a danger lurks in the background**: of all the players in this ecosystem, Amazon is the one best positioned to execute the disintermediation scenario if it ever chooses to. It has direct billing relationships with a few hundred million Prime households, world-class consumer distribution, its own devices (Echo, Fire, Kindle,

Eero), and a long corporate history of entering markets as a neutral supplier before competing with its own customers (retail marketplace sellers, AWS customers, logistics partners can all testify). A potential "**Prime Connect**" offering, baseline global satellite messaging and data bundled into Amazon Prime, terrestrial capacity bought wholesale via eSIM, would be a more natural and more dangerous version of the OEM global plan than anything Apple or Samsung could ship, because Amazon already owns the subscription relationship and the payment channels. There is *no known evidence* this is planned; everything visible points to the infrastructure-supplier strategy, and Amazon's D2D constellation won't have meaningful capacity until the end of the 2020s anyway. But telcos partnering with Amazon Leo should remember they are **dual sourcing their coverage layer from two companies**, one that has announced it is targeting their customers, and one that owns all means to eventually doing so without announcing it.

What really makes 2026 a pivotal year is that Amazon Leo is now making the transition from promises to reality. Enterprise customers are already testing actual hardware. The partnership with AT&T confirms the "Enterprise-First" strategy. Whether Amazon can translate this momentum into the critical subscriber numbers and widespread coverage will determine whether the satellite internet market evolves into a true duopoly—or whether SpaceX continues to hold sole market dominance [3].

**To sum up:** Amazon Leo's entry makes the *supply side* of satellite connectivity competitive, which is unambiguously good for telcos in the 2026-2030 window with better prices, real alternatives and reduced SpaceX leverage. The long-run question it doesn't resolve is the same one hanging over the whole industry: when the coverage layer is owned by two of the most powerful companies on earth and the customer relationship is increasingly mediated by OEMs and platforms, what exactly is left that only a telco can do? Amazon Leo's entry into the market delays potential MNO disruption but does not prevent it.

## 8. The 'Impossible' Shaping a Better Future – an insightful op-ed by Gwynne Shotwell

To mark the 40th anniversary of the magazine "Via Satellite," [Gwynne Shotwell, SpaceX President and COO wrote an op-ed](#) for the anniversary issue, which was published on September 1, 2026. It is a first-hand SpaceX marketing essay, without an interviewer asking critical questions. But precisely because these are her own, carefully chosen words, some of her statements are insightful for our analysis.

**The one hard number - 18 million monthly active users (MAU).** She writes that on average, more than 18 million people actively rely on Starlink Mobile monthly to connect their phone in areas where terrestrial service is unavailable, and that 650 Starlink Mobile satellites were deployed in 18 months. This is, as far as we know, the first concrete usage figure SpaceX has published for the D2D service, and it is a primary citable source. It is also analytically rich when putting it next to Gopalan's Q2 remark that satellite usage was at 0.0002% of network traffic (0.0003% at summer peak). 18 million MAU sounds impressive, but it is worth noting her own qualifier, these are people connecting where terrestrial service is unavailable, i.e., exactly the complementary dead-zone use case the skeptics describe. Eighteen million people

occasionally sending messages from dead zones is a feature; it is not yet a carrier business. The 0.0002% figure is the strongest single argument for the complement thesis and aligns perfectly with Shotwell's 18 million MAU as an example of our "same service, two narratives" argument mentioned below.

**A rhetorical land-grab worth flagging: the capacity claim.** This is the most strategically interesting sentence in the piece. Shotwell claims D2D "enhances capacity in high density events, for example fast internet at crowded stadiums, along the Tour de France route, etc." If we recall Hillabrant's statement [18], [19] that "*coverage is not the same as capacity*," Shotwell's statement is a direct blow to the core argument of the established providers. Consider the math regarding beam size: a Starlink Direct-to-Cell beam has a footprint of approximately 260-1,550km<sup>2</sup> at the Earth's surface, whereas a cellular macro-cell has a footprint of approximately 8-50km<sup>2</sup> [19].<sup>3</sup> Crowded stadiums are the worst case for satellite capacity physics, definitely not a showcase. Either SpaceX believes V3-generation beamforming changes this math, or this is deliberate narrative positioning to blunt the skeptics' strongest talking point ahead of the 2027 service launch. For our assessment, this sentence is evidence that the battle has moved from "coverage vs. capacity" as separate domains to SpaceX contesting the capacity domain itself, at least rhetorically. We treat the claim itself with heavy skepticism but the fact that she made it as significant.

**Competitive positioning against AST and Amazon.** Shotwell calls Starlink Mobile "the largest and most robust in-space communications provider for unmodified cellular devices, and the only one actively serving customers." The broadside "the only one actively serving customers" is aimed directly at AST SpaceMobile and Amazon's D2D plans, and serves as a reminder that, while debates over sovereignty rights and FCC filings continue, SpaceX is the only company with a service operating on a large scale. This first-mover portrayal of SpaceX is worth mentioning in every section on the competitive landscape.

**The dog that didn't bark.** It is striking that in a 1,200-word piece about the future of Starlink Mobile, there is not a single word about the terrestrial network buildout, the network operators, the "Big Three," spectrum, or going direct to consumers, and this four weeks after the earnings call, during which these plans had sent the markets into a flurry. Two possible readings: Either the target audience (the satellite industry's trade press, a celebratory anniversary issue) deemed confrontational content inappropriate; or SpaceX is deliberately limiting its rhetoric about the battle against the network operators to investor channels, while presenting a friendly, cooperative face to the industry. Either way, the contrast between Shotwell at the earnings call in August ("*I anticipate us to be able to acquire quite a few of their customers*") and Shotwell in September in "Via Satellite" (disaster relief, dead zones, life-saving connectivity) is a revelation. It appears, that **SpaceX pursues two narratives for two distinct target audiences** ("same service, two explanatory approaches"). For our assessment

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<sup>3</sup> Seeking Alpha Analyst Dane Bowler quotes [19] Crown Castle Inc. CEO Christian Hillabrant "*This means that for every megahertz of spectrum, terrestrial cell sites can support 30x more users. More importantly, as satellite operators seek to improve capacity, mobility and indoor performance, we believe terrestrial infrastructure will become an increasingly important complement to satellite networks*" and concludes "*I think there is merit to his analysis that satellites could be complementary to macro towers rather than a substitute. However, it remains a major unknown.*"

and continued monitoring of this development, the policy, regulatory, and investment implications are of critical importance.

**Smaller usable details:** V3 satellites adding up to 60 terabits of capacity per launch, a useful forward-looking capacity benchmark for any quantitative comparison; the constellation passing 10,000 satellites; the [Stargaze space-situational-awareness system](#) offered free to all operators, which is relevant from a broader perspective (orbital governance and eventually scientific applications, not so much telecom); finally, her claim that voice, video, and messaging services via laser inter-satellite-links is possible attracts global attention; however, the current satellite service does not live up to this claim, so her statement apparently refers to the V2/V3 targets and not to the product currently being offered.

## 9. What to watch next

There are several issues that need to be closely monitored to gain a balanced and meaningful understanding of future developments:

- The [post-2027 2 GHz award](#)
- The Satellite Connect Europe ownership resolution
- [SpaceX's November earnings call](#) (November 3, 2026)
- Whether SpaceX buys [Boost Mobile](#) or another terrestrial asset (this would be the cleanest acquisition path to a subscriber base and terrestrial core).
- Whether the Charter/Verizon talks produce an agreement or a Verizon legal challenge.

As we explore these different themes, further aspects of our analysis might emerge in due time.

## 10. References

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9. Wikipedia — "Amazon Leo" (for the consolidated timeline: 2020 FCC authorization, Kuiper→Leo rebrand Nov 12, 2025, launch procurement history). Useful as an index; verify details against primary reporting above. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon\\_Leo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon_Leo)

For the Starlink side of the comparison (satellite counts, revenue, subscriber base, Starlink Mobile plans): sources 10-15 below plus the SpaceX Q2 2026 earnings call coverage.

## 10.2. Part 2 — Impact on incumbent telecoms

*SpaceX/Starlink Mobile strategy and carrier confrontation:*

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<https://finance.yahoo.com/technology/articles/spacex-says-coming-t-verizon-005508467.html>
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## 11. Annex 1 - IRIS<sup>2</sup>

**IRIS<sup>2</sup> is sometimes referred to as the "EU's answer to Starlink,"** which is a somewhat superficial journalistic shorthand that could be misleading. IRIS<sup>2</sup> (Infrastructure for Resilience, Interconnectivity and Security by Satellite) is a ~290-satellite multi-orbit constellation (LEO plus MEO, unlike Starlink's pure LEO) being built under an EU concession by the SpaceRISE consortium (SES, Eutelsat, and Hispasat) with service targeted around 2030. Its primary purpose is secure governmental communications (defense, crisis management, border and maritime surveillance, diplomatic networks, protection of critical infrastructure) with sovereignty and resilience (including quantum-resistant encryption) as the design drivers, not consumer broadband economics. In that sense comparing IRIS<sup>2</sup> to Starlink is like comparing a government radio network to a commercial mobile operator.

However, the IRIS<sup>2</sup> concession model does include a commercial component. The private consortium partners are expected to market part of the capacity commercially, i.e., broadband for underserved areas, enterprise, maritime, aviation connectivity, which is partly how the ~€10.6 billion program is financed (roughly 60% public, 40% private money that needs a return). So, IRIS<sup>2</sup> is primarily governmental with a small commercial component, not "government-only." But in essence, IRIS<sup>2</sup> is not a mass-market consumer service, it is not direct-to-device (it serves terminals and gateways, not unmodified smartphones), its capacity is two or more orders of magnitude below Starlink's, and it will do essentially nothing to protect European telcos' consumer business from D2D dynamics. It's a sovereignty and security instrument, not a market competitor.

That sharpens the European picture: Europe is running a two-track strategy, and the tracks are often conflated. Track one is IRIS<sup>2</sup>, a sovereign *government* connectivity provider, where the Starlink comparison is really about the Ukraine lesson (never again depend on a foreign billionaire's constellation for critical (i.e., government and military) communications, not

about markets. Track two is Satellite Connect Europe/AST plus the 2 GHz allocation, the actual commercial D2D response relevant to operators and consumers. The EU decision (28 May 2026) links them (one-third of the 2 GHz band reserved for state use integrated with IRIS<sup>2</sup>), which is probably why the shorthand persists. When assessing threats to the telecom business, IRIS<sup>2</sup> belongs in a sidenote, not in the competitive lineup.

## 12. Annex 2 - Satellite Connect Europe

The [Satellite Connect Europe](#) joint venture, officially launched on February 27, 2026, headquartered in Luxembourg was initially announced in March 2025 as "SatCo". Trade press (including some of the referenced pieces) still uses "SatCo" colloquially.

**The operational setup is concrete:** leadership is in place, former Digicel executive Meredith Sharples as managing director and John Slamecka as chairman, five ground stations planned across Europe, investments already underway in Germany, the UK, Spain and France, a control center in Germany, a satellite production facility in Barcelona, and a test lab in Malaga. The company's own positioning language is worth quoting directly for the sovereignty angle: European-owned, with network operations, data handling and service control remaining within European jurisdiction, and holding exclusive European access to AST SpaceMobile's LEO constellation. That exclusivity clause is strategically important; it means European operators wanting the AST option *must* go through this Luxembourg entity, there is no bilateral or parallel path to AST.

**Two technical details also strengthen the differentiation-from-Starlink story:** AST's Block 2 BlueBird satellites carry roughly 225-square-metre antennas forming about 2,000 beams each, enabling precise beamforming to ordinary handsets using the operators' existing licensed spectrum and Vodafone's UK unit VodafoneThree plans to recycle legacy 2G spectrum for the purpose. That "runs on the MNO's own spectrum" architecture is the deeper reason the venture is structurally carrier-friendly: unlike SpaceX post-EchoStar, Satellite Connect Europe *cannot* bypass the operators even if it wanted to, because the spectrum it transmits on belongs to them. That is a governance feature, not just a technical one, and it is the cleanest single contrast with the Starlink Mobile trajectory.

**One caveat remains unchanged:** the rebrand and the "European-owned" branding don't by themselves resolve the ownership question mentioned above: the 50/50 structure with Texas-based AST SpaceMobile was reported (via Bloomberg) as potentially failing the "European entity" test in the Commission's 2 GHz proposal, and we found nothing indicating that this issue has been formally settled. The company's website language ("European-owned") is asserting the conclusion, not evidencing it. If the corporate structure has been adjusted to qualify for the protected spectrum block, that would have happened quietly in filings rather than press releases. To get full clarity, it would be worth checking Luxembourg registry documents or the eventual 2 GHz award decision. There are several sources for the rebrand and the overall mission of the consortium worth reading: Vodafone's press release of February

27,<sup>4</sup> 2026, TelecomTV (best analytical write-up)<sup>5</sup> and Light Reading (briefest, one unique detail)<sup>6</sup> coverage the same day, and the [company site](#) carries the telling self-description ("purpose-built to complement and strengthen — not replace — terrestrial mobile networks"). Two related sources are worth mentioning, as they provide further context for the announcement: Advanced Television's March 2, 2026 piece adds the MWC Barcelona context, the ground-station countries (Germany, UK, Spain, France), the Barcelona satellite production facility and Malaga test lab, and mentions an Orange MoU (<https://www.advanced-television.com/2026/03/02/vodafone-ast-spacemobile-open-satellite-connect-europe/>).

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<sup>4</sup> "Satellite Connect Europe launches to deliver direct-to-device broadband satellite connectivity for European Mobile Network Operators" (Vodafone Newsroom, February 27, 2026).

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<sup>5</sup> "Vodafone-backed SatCo becomes Satellite Connect Europe, begins ground station build" — TelecomTV, Access Evolution section, February 27, 2026, by the Access Evolution desk.

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<sup>6</sup> "Eurobites: Vodafone, AST SpaceMobile JV opens for business in Europe" — Light Reading, February 27, 2026 (part of the daily Eurobites roundup).

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