

Thales Alenia Space Asks France To Ease Imagery Sale Restrictions

By [Peter B. de Selding](#) | Sep. 9, 2013



Thales Alenia Space Chief Executive Jean-Loic Galle said he has had “discussions with all the relevant ministries in France. They understand clearly that customer requirements are changing quickly.” Credit: Photo by Yann Bourdin

PARIS — Satellite manufacturer Thales Alenia Space (TAS), which builds the high-resolution optical sensors for France’s military reconnaissance satellites, has asked the French government to ease restrictions on the commercial sale of imagery with a resolution sharper than 50 centimeters, Thales Alenia Space Chief Executive Jean-Loic Galle said Sept. 9.

At a briefing here during the World Satellite Business Week conference organized by Euroconsult, Galle said he has had “discussions with all the relevant ministries in France. They understand clearly that customer requirements are changing quickly — which is good news for TAS.”

Galle also addressed TAS’s recent settlement with the U.S. State Department that ended a years-long investigation by U.S. authorities of TAS’s sales of communications satellites to China, or to customers that use China’s Long March launch vehicle.

Galle said the cloud hanging over the company with respect to alleged violations of U.S. International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) “hit the whole reputation of the company.”

Galle said the two sides agreed that TAS never knowingly exported satellites with ITAR-regulated components to China and that it relied on its U.S. suppliers to determine what was ITAR-restricted and what was not.

At least one U.S. company has paid a fine and settled charges with the State Department, agreeing that it had sent to TAS equipment that had not been properly labeled.

Galle said the settlement with TAS vindicates the company’s long-held position that its ITAR compliance procedures were solid.

The discovery that some U.S. components were mislabeled, combined with the fact that U.S. authorities have continued to add to the list of ITAR-restricted parts, means TAS will no longer sell satellites for launch aboard Chinese rockets.

Galle said the company has no intention, for now, to replace its U.S. suppliers of ITAR-controlled parts with non-U.S. sources.

Thales Alenia Space has sold high-resolution optical systems to Turkey and, more recently and in partnership with Astrium Satellites of Europe, to the United Arab Emirates. The Franco-Italian company has also sold a high-resolution radar satellite payload to South Korea.

An informal agreement between France and the United States, arranged years ago, sets a 50-centimeter ground sampling distance as the threshold between what can be sold openly on the commercial market and what is subject to special procedures reserved for allies.

DigitalGlobe of Longmont, Colo., recently asked U.S. government regulators to relax the regulations, citing the same market forces as those cited by Galle. The high-resolution end of the global commercial Earth observation imagery market has been the fastest-growing segment.

Galle said it is not just France and the United States. He said other nations, including South Korea, Israel and Britain, are also active in developing high-resolution systems.

Astrium Satellites, like TAS, has been active in the Earth observation export market in recent years, selling more than a dozen systems. But Galle said most are in the 1-meter-class range, and that it is TAS, not Astrium, that has the expertise in the high-resolution market segment that is now the most dynamic.