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“Space Force” and Related DOD Proposals: Issues for Congress

Over the past year, Congress saw a variety of overlapping proposals advanced for the reorganization of U.S. military activities in space. Major proposals include

- the creation of a Space Force (SF), a new branch of the Armed Forces under the Secretary of the Air Force;
- the reestablishment of a U.S. Space Command as an additional unified combatant command; and
- the establishment of a Department of Defense Space Development Agency.

While few observers dispute the notion that the Department of Defense (DOD) should better organize and manage its space capabilities, agreement ends there. Some believe all three proposals should be adopted; others believe only some, if any, should become permanent institutions within DOD. Taken together, these overlapping proposals could present considerable challenges to DOD’s functioning in one of the most critically important operational domains. Regardless, the concepts and details of these military space-related proposals remain unclear—if not contradictory—at this time, prompting fundamental questions about plans to reorganize DOD’s space programs, capabilities, and agencies.

What Is The Role of Congress?

Article I, Section 8, of the U.S. Constitution empowers Congress “to raise and support Armies ... provide and maintain a Navy ... to make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces.” Accordingly, the establishment of a new military service is generally viewed as the prerogative of Congress rather than the executive branch. Therefore, while the President has directed the creation of a Space Force through Space Policy Directive-4, such a force may not officially come into existence unless and until Congress passes legislation for its establishment. In exercising its oversight and budgetary authorities, Congress will also have the opportunity to review whether the establishment of a U.S. Space Command and/or a Space Development Agency is an appropriate use of resources.

What Problems Need Solving?

Broadly speaking, two primary rationales are offered for the current focus on military space activities: improving the efficiency of extant space programs and better preparing DOD to contend with current and emerging threats.

Problem One: Program and Cost Efficiencies

Congress has long expressed its concerns that U.S. military programs in space have not kept pace with global technological developments. For more than two decades, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) and others have found that fragmentation and overlap in national security space acquisition management and

oversight have contributed to program delays and cancellations, cost increases, and inefficient operations. For example, in 2012, GAO identified 60 national security space stakeholder organizations across the U.S. government, of which 11 had oversight responsibilities, 8 had acquisition management responsibilities, and 6 were responsible for setting requirements. This fragmented leadership “contributed to poor coordination and lengthy decision making ... [these] challenges are magnified in space programs because their technologies are frequently obsolete by the time systems are deployed.”

Problem Two: Increased Military Threats

Congress has also expressed concern over the slow pace with which DOD and the Air Force have addressed the growing threat to U.S. national security in space from adversaries, particularly Russia and China, and, to a lesser extent, North Korea and Iran. This is because, in their view, the space domain has evolved into a war-fighting domain like air, land, and sea, and is a domain that is both congested and contested.

Congested. Around 2,000 active satellites are in orbit today, and that number is increasing. More than 100 governments—as well as commercial entities—from more than 50 countries control these assets. Further, an increase of space activities in the past 60 years has created an estimated 23,000 pieces of uncontrolled debris that can disable or destroy a satellite. In addition, the testing of antisatellite weapons by China in 2007 and recently by India in 2019 have added additional pieces of debris to an already congested space environment.

Contested. According to DOD officials and documents, U.S. military advantages in space are at risk. Adversaries have studied U.S. warfighting concepts and focused their attention on U.S. space systems’ vulnerabilities. China, Russia, and other nations are pursuing capabilities to target U.S. space systems using jammers, lasers, kinetic-kill, and now cyberattack capabilities. Some observers contend that international actors are aware of U.S. space superiority and understand the critical reliance of the United States on space systems to achieve national interests; accordingly, some adversarial actors—Russia and China in particular—have made investments to counter U.S. advantages in space.

Missing: An Effective Space Proponent?

DOD is a hierarchical organization, both from an organizational and cultural standpoint. In practice, this means decisions are generally made at senior levels and implemented at lower levels with comparatively little “bottom up” influence on those decisions, particularly those that affect the overall defense enterprise. Further, senior leaders often compete with each other for DOD resources—the higher the rank of a given leader, the more likely it is

that he or she will be able to “win” those competitions on behalf of their defense organization.

Some observers therefore contend that the root of systemic challenges with military space programs is the absence of a sufficiently senior “proponent” for space within DOD, with enough authority to effectively manage space programs. Instead, space programs are scattered throughout DOD, including across the military services, and represented at comparatively lower levels of the bureaucracy. Viewed in this light, proposals for reorganizing DOD space activities appear to be designed to solve the “proponent” problem by ensuring that there are senior-level advocates within the Department responsible for

- building, maintaining, and equipping space-focused military personnel (the Space Force);
- conducting operations in the space domain (a U.S. Space Command); and
- creating greater speed and coherence to space acquisitions (the Space Defense Agency, or SDA).

What Are Some of the Risks Associated with Current DOD Space Proposals?

While a sufficiently ranked proponent within DOD could lead to better policy and programmatic outcomes, an excess of such proponents has, at times, led to U.S. military organizational and operational confusion. Proposals to reform DOD’s space programs by creating multiple four-star level proponents could therefore have significant bearing on the U.S. military’s ability to accomplish its missions in a variety of ways, including the following:

Military Services vs. Combatant Commands

Within DOD, military services are responsible for training and equipping forces, while unified combatant commands are responsible for using those forces in operations. In the early 1980s, successive military blunders (including Desert One, Grenada, and the Beirut Marine Barracks bombing) demonstrated serious shortcomings with how the different military services, and the Department overall, interacted to plan and conduct operations. After more than four years’ deliberations, Congress found that the interference of the military services in the planning and conduct of military operations was common to all these events. Service interference made it difficult to determine who actually was in charge of a given operation; as a result, missions failed and U.S. lives were lost. In 1986, over the Department’s objections, Congress passed P.L. 99-433, the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act, which clarified the chain of command and circumscribed military service roles and responsibilities to training and equipping their respective forces.

More than 30 years since the passage of Goldwater-Nichols, the services still at times have difficulty staying out of the operational chain of command. In his memoir *Duty*, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates notes that in prosecuting operations in Afghanistan, the U.S. Marine Corps managed to organize its command relationships largely outside the U.S.-led NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) when it deployed elements to Helmand as part of the “surge.”

Several observers at the time maintained that this service interference, which led to a Marine deployment to Helmand rather than Kandahar (the campaign’s center of gravity at the time), may have weakened ISAF’s strategy.

Risks to Military Space Operations and Capabilities?

Taking this history of DOD’s organization design into account, if all current proposals for rationalizing U.S. military space programs and assets come to fruition, DOD might risk creating chain of command confusion in space—a domain that is hardest to access, yet strategically vital. In the first instance, space would be the only domain upon which both a unified combatant command and military service would be exclusively focused. What if the SF Chief of Staff and the Commander of SPACECOM have differences in priorities related to operations, similar to the dynamics that led to *Desert One*?

Related, given that the SF Chief of Staff will initially report to the Secretary of the Air Force, how might differences in priorities between Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force and Space Force—both four-star level positions—be adjudicated? Will Air Force programmatic priorities be given precedence over those of Space Force? Can these frictions be mitigated, and if so, how?

Risks to Program Coherence?

Military services and their secretariats are responsible for buying equipment for their respective forces. Accordingly, one of the primary intended functions of a new Space Force is to create a more streamlined system of procurement for space capabilities, and, in the process, address the long-standing congressional concerns with space program management. Some therefore express concern that the newly established SDA might duplicate those procurement functions, creating even more complexity and confusion when developing and purchasing space systems.

Costs and Tradeoffs?

DOD has requested \$14.1 billion for space in FY2020. Of that amount, approximately \$72 million will be applied to the initial stand-up of the new Space Force (current plans estimate that a new Space Force will cost approximately \$2 billion over five years). Yet some observers express concern that costs might balloon in the future as the Space Force matures as a bureaucracy. Others note that the administrative costs for SF itself will likely be shouldered by the Air Force Service Secretariat; the latter will likely have to expand to manage the acquisition and budgetary requirements of both SF and the Air Force.

Congress has sought to curtail headquarters increases in recent years, including through limiting the size of military staffs and creating workforce reduction targets. Some therefore express concern that the simultaneous creation of Space Force, Space Command, and the Space Defense Agency may contradict the intent of prior Congresses. More broadly, some express concern that resources might be better allocated to other DOD priorities such as cyber defense or the nuclear program.

Kathleen J. McInnis, Specialist in International Security

Stephen M. McCall, Analyst in Military Space, Missile Defense, and Defense Innovation

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