



Defense Primer: U.S. Space Force

The U.S. Space Force is the sixth branch of the Armed Forces, established under the Department of the Air Force (DAF) with the enactment of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (FY2020 NDAA; P.L. 116-92). According to Title 10, Section 9081, of the *U.S. Code*, “The Space Force shall be organized, trained, and equipped to—(1) provide freedom of operation for the United States in, from, and to space; (2) conduct space operations; and (3) protect the interests of the United States in space.”

Since the creation of the Space Force, space has become an increasingly important domain for the United States—as well as for adversaries with growing space capabilities. In 2025, President Donald Trump issued executive orders to create a space-intensive initiative known as Golden Dome and to ensure “American Space Superiority.” Space Force officials are reportedly considering doubling the size of the force. Congress will play a role in deciding whether or not to fund these initiatives, and in overseeing their progress.

Why the Space Force Was Created

Since the 1980s, U.S. policymakers have become increasingly concerned about potential adversaries operating in the space domain. The United States and Soviet Union tested anti-satellite (ASAT) missiles in the 1980s. The United States last conducted such a test in 1985, citing the harm resulting debris could cause to spacecraft in orbit. The People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) in 2007 became the third country to test an ASAT weapon. Military commanders reportedly have said the PRC test was a turning point, as it exposed a potential vulnerability of U.S. reliance on satellites. After 2007, China and Russia continued to develop military space capabilities. A decade later, some Members of Congress and the first Trump Administration proposed a distinct military service devoted to countering space, cyber space, and missile threats. The FY2020 NDAA authorized the establishment of the service on December 20, 2019.

Space Force Mission and Functions

The Space Force’s mission is to “secure our Nation’s interests in, from, and to space.” The mission statement refers to each of the service’s “core functions”:

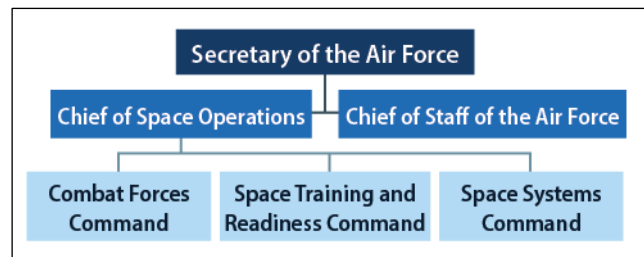
- **To space.** Providing assured space access through the service’s launch, range, and control network infrastructure.

In addition to these core functions, Space Force carries out four cross-cutting enterprise functions: intelligence, cyberspace operations, command and control, and space domain awareness (detecting, characterizing, attributing, predicting, and targeting objects and activities in space).

Space Force Organization

The U.S. Space Force and the U.S. Air Force are two separate and distinct military uniformed services with the same civilian leader in the DAF (see **Figure 1**). The Chief of Space Operations (CSO) is the highest-ranking uniformed space advisor and reports to the civilian Secretary of the Air Force. The current CSO, General Chance B. Saltzman, was appointed in November 2022. The Office of the CSO and the Space Force Headquarters are located at the Pentagon. The Space Force organizes, trains, and equips space force personnel, called Guardians, to support unified combatant commands such as U.S. Space Command.

Figure 1. U.S. Space Force Within the Department of the Air Force



Source: Adapted from U.S. Space Force Headquarters Air Force - April 19, 2022 (spaceforce.mil), <https://www.ussf-cfc.spaceforce.mil/About-Us/About-Combat-Forces-Command>.

The CSO oversees a three-level command structure. Two- or three-star generals lead three mission-focused field commands. Colonels lead units called deltas that are subordinate to field commands. Lieutenant colonels or majors lead smaller Space Force squadrons.

The Space Force’s three field commands are Combat Forces Command (CFC), previously Space Operations Command (SpOC); Space Training and Readiness Command (STARCOM); and Space Systems Command (SSC). CFC develops tactics, techniques, procedures, and force-generation models, among other roles. CFC is based at Peterson Space Force Base (SFB) in Colorado. STARCOM prepares and trains Guardians at Patrick SFB in

- **In space.** Protecting the joint force and nation from space and counterspace threats to achieve “space superiority” (the condition under which forces can operate without prohibitive interference while denying adversaries space control).
- **From space.** Delivering *global mission operations* like satellite communications; positioning, navigation, and timing; and missile warning.

Florida. SSC, based at Los Angeles Air Force Base in California, handles acquisition.

Space Force Budget

Congress appropriated the requested total of \$26.1 billion for FY2026 in discretionary funding for the Space Force in the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-75, Division A). Congress provided funding for types of accounts that were in some cases more than (procurement and personnel) and in other cases less than (research, development, test, and evaluation [RDT&E]) the service's request. For the Space Force, the act provided \$14.9 billion for RDT&E, \$5.7 billion for operations and maintenance (O&M), \$4.0 billion for procurement, and \$1.5 billion for military personnel (MILPERS). The FY2026 MILPERS request planned for an end-strength of 10,400 military personnel, 600 (6%) more than in FY2025. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 (FY2026 NDAA; P.L. 119-60, §401) authorized the service's requested increase in end strength.

According to a CRS review of FY2027 budget documents published by the Department of Defense (using a "secondary Department of War designation" under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025), in FY2026, the Space Force plans to spend \$5.9 billion in mandatory defense funding from the 2025 reconciliation law (P.L. 119-21). (Such funding carried a five-year period of availability.)

For FY2027, the Space Force requested a total of \$71.3 billion, according to a CRS review of the department's budget documents. The request included \$59.2 billion in discretionary funding from regular appropriations and \$12.1 billion in mandatory funding anticipated to come from an FY2027 reconciliation bill. Taken together, the discretionary and mandatory request is 123% more than the FY2026 enacted total of \$31.9 billion. Of the discretionary request for 2027, \$38.4 billion (65%) is for RDT&E. The Space Force has also requested \$9.6 billion in discretionary funding for procurement, \$9.3 billion for O&M, and \$1.9 billion for MILPERS. The Administration has not yet released an end strength request for FY2027.

Major Space Acquisition Programs

Congress provided FY2026 funding and DOD has requested FY2027 funding for the Space Force to develop and procure launch vehicles, spacecraft (satellites and orbital vehicles), and terrestrial systems and equipment. Major acquisition programs included the following:

- The **National Security Space Launch (NSSL)** program procures commercial launch services for the Space Force, Air Force, Navy, National Reconnaissance Office, Space Development Agency, and other government agencies. This program is intended to ensure U.S. access to space.
- The **GPS Enterprise** provides 24-hour-a-day, worldwide, all-weather three-dimensional positioning,

navigation, and timing (PNT) information for military and civilian users.

- **Missile Warning Systems** supply warning of strategic missile attacks using the existing Space-Based Infrared System. The Space Force is developing the Overhead Persistent Infrared and Resilient (OPIR) Missile Warning and Missile Tracking program. Section 8149 of P.L. 119-75 prohibited any pause, cancellation, or termination of OPIR programs.
- **Satellite Communications (SATCOM) Projects** deliver three types of SATCOM. *Strategic* SATCOM refers to Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (NC3); *protected* SATCOM is designed to enable communications to deployed forces in contested environments; and *wideband/narrowband* SATCOM is designed to offer large amounts of data transfer in less-contested environments.
- Under the **Proliferated Space Warfighter Architecture**, the Space Force is soliciting, purchasing, and launching low-Earth-orbit satellites to create a constellation that will conduct multiple missions. The missions would overlap with the systems conducting PNT, missile warning, and communications. These satellites are intended to fly at lower altitudes and in greater numbers, providing additional capabilities and more resilience.
- President Trump's Executive Order 14186 directed the development of a next-generation missile shield called Golden Dome for America (GDA) with many space-related components. Space Force General Michael A. Guetlein is directing the effort. FY2027 budget documents detailed programs related to GDA within the Space Force, a Golden Dome Fund, the Missile Defense Agency, and other military departments.

Potential Considerations for Congress

- Space Force officials reportedly have said its military and civilian workforce could double over the next decade. Congress may or may not seek information or a study about the organization, size, composition, cost, and other impacts of the possible expansion, including possible impacts on infrastructure, personnel, development and procurement programs, ground systems, and the industrial base.
- Congress may or may not consider oversight of executive branch goals to develop and advance Golden Dome and ensure "American superiority in space," including assessing related system architectures, acquisition requirements, funding, facilities, and personnel requirements for executing those plans.

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