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# Defense Primer: U.S. Space Force

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The U.S. Space Force, established by Congress in 2019 (P.L. 116-92, §952), is one of the six branches of the Armed Forces. 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 important domain for the United States—and for adversaries with 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 may choose whether and how to fund these initiatives and oversee 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 stopped testing ASAT missiles in 1985, "citing concerns" that debris from the tests "could harm commercial and military satellites 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, cyberspace, and missile threats. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (FY2020 NDAA; P.L. 116-92, §952) authorized the establishment of the service.

## Space Force Mission and Functions

The Space Force's mission statement—to "secure our Nation's interests in, from, and to space"—refers to each of the service's "core functions":

- ***In* space.** Using space control to protect the military 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," such as satellite communications (SATCOM); positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT); and missile warning.
- ***To* space.** Providing assured space access through the service's launch, range, and satellite control network infrastructure.

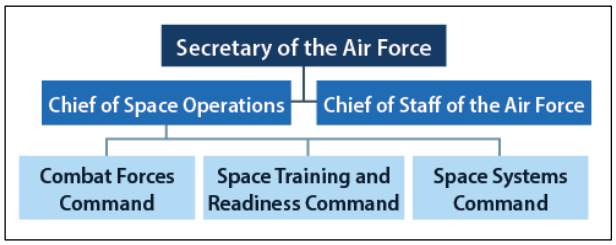
In addition to these core functions, Space Force carries out four cross-cutting "enterprise functions": intelligence, cyberspace operations, command and control, and space domain awareness (i.e., detecting, characterizing, attributing, and tracking objects in space to understand intent and predict movement).

In April 2026, the Space Force published *Future Operating Environment 2040* and *Objective Force 2040*. These conceptual documents described a potential future space domain with "lower thresholds for kinetic and non-kinetic attack." In such an environment, the service anticipates requiring the ability to react quickly—by leveraging artificial intelligence, commercial services, and joint and international partnerships—and requiring improved resilience—achieved by diversifying capabilities and distributing assets orbitally and geographically. The Space Force plans to release a new *Objective Force* every five years.

## 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 Department of the Air Force (DAF), much like the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy within the Department of the Navy (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 (SecAF). In August 2026, the Senate confirmed Lieutenant General Douglas Schiess to replace General B. Chance Saltzman as CSO. 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**




**Sources:** CRS from F. Schnell, *Space Domain Awareness (SDA) Organizational Structures & Relationships*, U.S. Space Force (USSF), Space Systems Command, July 28, 2022; and USSF, Combat Forces Command, "About Combat Forces Command," 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 Florida. SSC, based at Los Angeles Air Force Base in California, handles acquisition.

Between January and July 2026, the Space Force reorganized its acquisition structure, consolidating some Program Executive Officers under nine Portfolio Acquisition Executives (PAEs), in line with the Pentagon's *Acquisition Transformation Strategy*. DAF reportedly plans for PAEs to follow the example set by organizations they may replace: the Space Development Agency and Rapid Capabilities Office. PAEs are to report to the civilian Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Space Acquisition and Integration, who serves as the statutory Space Service Acquisition Executive and reports to the SecAF.

## Space Force Budget

For FY2027, the Space Force requested a total of $71.3 billion, according to 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 requests were 123% more than the FY2026 enacted total of $31.9 billion. Of the discretionary request for 2027, $38.4 billion (65%) was for RDT&E. The Space Force requested $9.6 billion in discretionary funding for procurement, $9.3 billion for O&M, and $1.9 billion for military personnel. This request planned for an end-strength of 13,200 military personnel, 2,800 (27%) more than authorized for FY2026. The House-passed and Senate Armed Services Committee-reported FY2027 NDAA would authorize this increase (H.R. 8800, §401 and S. 4784, §401).

## Major Space Acquisition Programs

The Space Force develops and procures launch vehicles, spacecraft (i.e., satellites and orbital vehicles), and terrestrial systems and equipment. Major acquisition programs include

- The **National Security Space Launch (NSSL)** program procures commercial launch services for the Space Force, Air Force, Navy, National Reconnaissance Office, and other government agencies. This program is intended to ensure U.S. access to space.
- **GPS Enterprise** provides 24-hour-a-day, worldwide, all-weather, three-dimensional PNT information for military and civilian users.
- **Missile warning systems** use the existing Space-Based Infrared System. The Space Force is developing a replacement, the Next Generation Overhead Persistent Infrared (OPIR) program of satellites in geosynchronous-Earth-orbit (beyond 22,000 miles from Earth) and polar or highly elliptical orbits, along with a ground system. The Space Force is also launching Resilient Missile Warning/Missile Tracking (MW/MT) low-Earth-orbit (LEO) and medium-Earth orbit satellites (about 60-1,200 miles and 1,200-22,000 miles from Earth, respectively). The Space Force has launched a LEO constellation, previously as part of Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture (PWSA) developed under the Space Development Agency.
- **Golden Dome for America,** a next-generation missile shield in development, may include several space-related components. Space Force General Michael A. Guetlein is directing its development. FY2027 budget documents detailed programs related to Golden Dome within the Space Force, a Golden Dome Fund, the Missile Defense Agency, and other military departments.
- **Satellite communications 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. The Space Force acquires satellites in multiple orbital regimes and contracts for SATCOM services with commercial providers. The Space Force is also developing proliferated constellations that would route data through space to enable the PWSA and Golden Dome for America.

## Potential Considerations for Congress

- The Space Force plans to double its personnel over the next decade. Congress may 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, and the industrial base.
- Some Members have advocated for fostering competition in areas including space launch and SATCOM to "ensure that the Department is getting the right system at the right price." Some Members have raised concerns about the use of non-competitive, sole-source contracts. Congress may consider whether and how to encourage or mandate competition in these or other areas of space acquisition.
- As part of Golden Dome, the Space Force is developing space-based interceptors (SBI). The House-passed FY2027 NDAA would require the Pentagon to conduct an independent cost assessment for SBI and certify to Congress successful flight testing before starting full-rate production (H.R. 8800, §1655). The Trump Administration opposed this provision, saying it would delay delivery of SBI.
- The Air Force's FY2027 budget proposed to terminate OPIR Polar. Congress prohibited any pause, cancellation, or termination of OPIR programs (P.L. 119-75, §8149), and the House-passed FY2027 NDAA would require DAF to "continue, maintain, and execute" OPIR-Polar (H.R. 8800, §1606). S. 4784 would authorize $500 million to fund the satellite program, and H.Rept. 119-715 accompanying the House Appropriations Committee-reported FY2027 defense appropriations act would appropriate $200 million for it.

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