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Why a Space Force Can Wait

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When President Trump [first mentioned](#) the idea of creating a “Space Force” in March of this year, few people would have expected that his seemingly offhand remark would take us to the point where we are today. The administration has called on the Department of Defense (DoD) to develop plans to stand up a new military department for national security space by 2020 while the Air Force has released its own [proposal](#) for the gradual development of the Space Force. While the administration and supporters of the Space Force proposal believe a new Service would remedy the issues in our national security space enterprise, they are overstepping in their solution.

I do not disagree with the contention that the current organizational structure of national security space is problematic. Most experts have noted that space capabilities are spread unevenly throughout DoD and Intelligence Community, without much interoperability and communication, and space authority and coordination is fragmented. As a result, there is no true military space career path and Air Force officers with no space background are often shifted into space work. Additionally, the Air Force tends to [decrease](#) space-related funding in order to support aircraft when balancing priorities. These are serious issues that need to be resolved; however, the solution is not to jump to create a new military department. DoD needs to slow down and take a deep breath, evaluate the issues that are causing our national security space enterprise to falter, and develop a strategic plan to fix them. Throwing more money and even more bureaucracy at the issue is not going to help, and holding to unrealistic timelines will not allow for thorough progress reviews of incremental steps, such as establishing a space combatant command or a dedicated space acquisition and development agency.

A significant issue with developing a Space Force by 2020 is the cost needed to establish a new military department. [Statements](#) from the administration describing the Space Force as “budget-neutral” are misleading. Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan even noted that standing up the new Service could cost “[billions](#),” though DoD has not completed a formal cost evaluation as of yet. It is widely understood that standing up organizations in DoD is expensive. Some things are fairly certain to cost

DoD: overhead costs, development of doctrine, consolidation of facilities, movement of people and families, a service academy or war college, recruiting pipelines, and of course, new uniforms. This year, DoD plans to spend about [\\$12.7 billion](#) on unclassified space programs. Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson recently estimated that an additional [\\$13 billion](#) would be needed to establish both the new Department of the Space Force and the new U.S. Space Command (SPACECOM), and to keep both operating over the next five years.

For supporters of the Space Force, it is easy to claim a low or neutral budget with the Space Force just using existing personnel and facilities to continue current operations plus a small overhead staff. However, this also assumes that the Space Force will be able to acquire all space personnel from the other Services. If asked to join the Space Force, some service members may choose not to jump ship, per say, out of loyalty to their Service, causing the Space Force to have to recruit elsewhere. With the rushed timeframe of 2020, identifying, incentivizing, and building a relationship with key space personnel in all the departments—not just the Air Force—will take time and trust. Service members will be hard-pressed to leave their Service for a new department without sufficient trust in the leaders and mission of the Space Force. Furthermore, given that the majority of space personnel are civilians or contractors, the composition of a Space Force would be unlike any other military department. If a military department is mostly staffed by non-military personnel, is that necessarily the best fit for reorganization?

Despite DoD leaders now considering space a warfighting domain, space operations mainly provide critical support to operations in all other domains. Funding for space capabilities and operations is mixed between not only the different military departments and Services, but also intelligence agencies both within and outside of DoD. Sieving the right “pieces” out of DoD—and possibly the Intelligence Community—may add further bureaucracy to these programs. More worryingly, it may not even be possible to suss out the right programs or people due to classification levels and diversification of space capabilities. A new military department would almost inevitably result in extra bureaucracy and complications amongst the Services when conducting joint operations, which would likely account for almost all of the Space Force’s operations.

Re-establishing a space-focused combatant command—the first U.S. SPACECOM was disestablished in 2002—will solve many of the issues agreed upon by space experts. First, operational space authority would be consolidated and led by a four-star general. This would provide much-needed leadership and

direction across DoD. A SPACECOM would also provide the opportunity to develop highly-skilled space operators and provide a clearer career path for service members interested in a career in space operations. Similar to U.S. Special Operations Command, a SPACECOM would need to be able to manage all space operations and coordinate joint operations amongst the Services. Re-establishing SPACECOM is a good first step down the path to finding out the right construct for our national security space enterprise. Policymakers and defense officials should give SPACECOM the time and resources it needs to operate efficiently over the course of a few years in order to determine its success. Rushing to establish a Space Force by 2020 does not give ample time to test and synchronize SPACECOM with the rest of the combatant commands and the Services' space infrastructures. It may well be that another organizational construct fits the bill better than a Space Force, but without first testing—and providing ample time to test—a re-established SPACECOM, policymakers will not be able to make an informed decision on how to move forward.

The administration's plan towards a Space Force also includes establishing a [Space Development Agency \(SDA\)](#). Modeled after the Missile Defense Agency (MDA), the SDA would act as a research, development, and acquisition agency for national security space. Currently, the MDA has acquisition authorities to both conduct its own research and development but also to coordinate different acquisition programs across the Services. An SDA would have similar authorities to coordinate development and acquisition of space assets across the Services, providing top-level leadership on space acquisitions across the Department of Defense. SPACECOM and the SDA together may be the goldilocks combination for managing our national security space enterprise.

Some analysts have noted that even if Congress passes the necessary legislation to mandate the initial reorganization of military space, it may not go far enough to guarantee a complete solution to the problem. However, the case of reorganization of special operations forces showcases that this is not necessarily true. As Alice Hunt Friend and I [recently noted](#), Congress has recognized the incomplete structure of special operations forces and has called for a study on the issue in this year's National Defense Authorization Act. If Congress and DoD agree to re-evaluate the status of the national security space enterprise in a few years, there will be a much more efficient and successful reorganization process.

Establishing a Department of the Space Force by 2020 is rushing into an end solution without proper consideration. Although there have been several space reorganization studies in the past two decades, a

comprehensive public debate of our current space capabilities and their organization is just beginning. A complication to this discussion is, of course, that many space systems and operations are classified. If creating a Space Force is a matter of inevitability, as many believe, the process should be done thoughtfully and with intention. Other solutions presented—such as SPACECOM, a Space Development Agency, the Space Operations Force, and a Space Corps—are all viable options to remedy and make DoD space operations more efficient. Perhaps it is also time to consider that perhaps this reorganization is unique and therefore should not be limited to mimicking already-existing systems.

An incremental approach to developing a comprehensive organization for our national security space enterprise is a smarter decision. Our aim as a policy community should be to evaluate all options thoroughly, hold public discourse, and develop a solution that will best support our national security space enterprise.

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