



Space Force: An unwise solution to an overhyped threat

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There's good news and bad news in the Trump administration's plan to establish the Space Force as the sixth branch of the U.S. military. The good news is that sales of formerly-ironic "space shuttle door gunner" patches are probably going to spike. The bad news is that the creation of a new military branch carries far more risks, costs and complications than benefits.

The value of the Space Force should be judged against the kinds of threats that it is intended to counter. A substantial increase in threat could warrant the drastic step of creating a new military branch, but space is not as dangerous as Trump and his senior officials are making it out to be.

Competition with Russia and China is a consistent theme of the administration's major national security documents. Senior officials frequently cite the activities of these countries in outer space, such as China's use of a missile to destroy one of its own satellites in 2007. American officials are especially worried about how much the military and major civilian economic sectors depend on satellites that are vulnerable to disruption or destruction.

The Trump administration has hyped the threats while ignoring factors that would likely restrain Russian and Chinese behavior in space. The most aggressive option available to Russia and China would be the destruction of U.S. satellites. The primary risk of such an attack would be the debris created by it that could inflict collateral damage on Russia or Chinese satellites. In fact, China's growing military ambitions increase its vulnerability to space debris because it must place more satellites in orbit to facilitate military operations farther from its shores. Less destructive actions such as jamming or temporarily disabling U.S. satellites would carry lower risks, but it would also be easier for the United States to recover from such actions.

Another mark against the Trump administration's plan for the Space Force is the difficulty of creating a new branch of the military. The costs of adding a sixth branch would come on two fronts. First and most obvious to taxpayers is the price tag.

In an early August 2018 speech, Vice President Pence said that the administration would ask Congress for \$8 billion to invest in "space security systems over the next five years."

Furthermore, establishing a new military branch carries significant overhead costs. According to Fred Kaplan writing for Slate, “A new service would mean a new headquarters, another seat on the Joint Chiefs of Staff (and a few hundred more Pentagon-based staff) ... (and) another military academy (with faculty, grounds, scholarships, etc.)”

The Space Force could cannibalize existing facilities and officers to hasten this process, but that would probably not go over well with other branches.

The second basket of costs associated with establishing a new military branch is bureaucratic. Trump cannot create a new branch of the military without congressional approval. Legislation to create a Space Corps within the U.S. Air Force passed the House in 2017 but failed to get through to Senate and was resisted by several high-ranking officials at the time, including the secretary of defense and the commander of Air Force Space Command.

Moreover, even if the administration could secure congressional approval, it would likely face additional bureaucratic battles within the military. A new branch of the military needs its own people and infrastructure. The Space Force could take these resources from the Air Force, the current branch with primary responsibility for space operations, which would not be a welcome development for the latter. Given the history of inter-service squabbling, the transition period could be quite arduous.

Creating a Space Force as a separate branch of the U.S. military is not a wise decision. It is an overreaction to the threats facing the United States, and its costs outweigh its dubious benefits. Instead of sticking to the current plan, which promises to generate more sensational headlines than sensible policy initiatives, the administration should focus its efforts on improving existing military organizations that handle space.

One path forward would be to emulate Cyber Command, which is not a separate branch of the military but a unified command. Instead of being its own branch, Cyber Command incorporates cyber-focused units from across all the branches of the military. Creating a unified command for space would help the military focus its resources and push for more investment in new capabilities without creating the economic and bureaucratic headaches.

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