



Defense Primer: U.S. Space Command

U.S. Space Command (USSPACECOM) is responsible for U.S. military operations in space. As a geographic combatant command (CCMD), USSPACECOM receives personnel and equipment from each of the military services to execute its mission (see **Figure 1**). USSPACECOM is distinct from, and complementary to, the United States Space Force (USSF), which is an armed service under the Department of the Air Force (DAF). For additional background, see CRS In Focus IF12610, *Defense Primer: The United States Space Force*.

Background

USSPACECOM was initially established in 1985. In 2002, Congress approved a broad reorganization of the CCMDs to facilitate DOD’s shift in focus to counter-terrorism and homeland defense. This reorganization included the disestablishment of USSPACECOM, and its responsibilities and assets were transferred to U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM). Driven by the increase in adversary space and counter space capabilities, Congress, in the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (FY2019 NDAA); P.L. 115-232 §169, reconstituted USSPACECOM as a subordinate unified command under USSTRATCOM. In 2019, the Trump Administration elevated USSPACECOM to a CCMD, citing space’s importance as a vital warfighting domain.

Mission and Organization

According to USSPACECOM, the command “plans, executes, and integrates military spacepower into multi-domain global operations in order to deter aggression, defend national interests, and when necessary, defeat threats.” The command is responsible for conducting space operations, sensor management, satellite communications management, and trans-regional missile defense. USSPACECOM’s area of responsibility (AOR) begins 62 miles above the Earth’s surface (also known as the Kármán Line), extending to the Moon and beyond (see **Figure 2**). USSPACECOM, led by a four-star general or admiral, is headquartered at Peterson Space Force Base (SFB) in Colorado. The current USSPACECOM commander is USSF General Stephen Whiting.

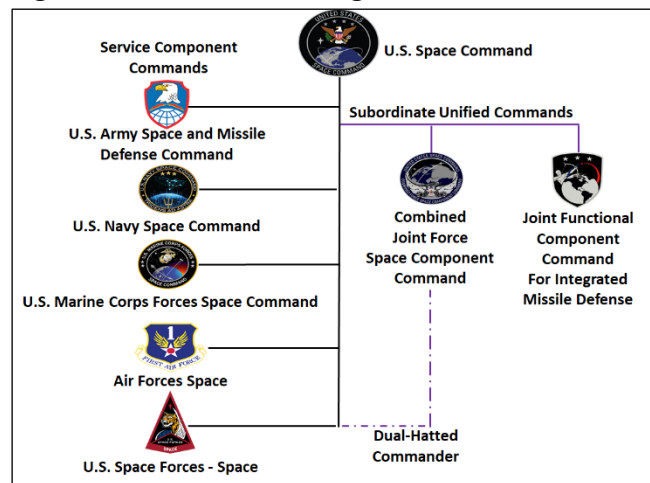
USSPACECOM is organized into five subordinate service component commands and two functional component commands. Approximately 1,700 personnel are directly assigned to USSPACECOM headquarters. About 18,000 joint force personnel are assigned to the command’s seven sub-components, which are based in six states.

Space Domain Challenges and Threats

Space is an increasingly contested domain. The People’s Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation, and other adversaries have, or are developing, offensive space capabilities. In its 2022 report on space security, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) provided an overview of such capabilities, some of which are capable of harming or interfering with DOD and U.S. commercial assets in all

orbits. These capabilities range from offensive cyber and electronic warfare platforms to ground- and space-based anti-satellite weapons.

Figure 1. USSPACECOM Organizational Structure



Source: DOD Media

USSPACECOM officials have raised concerns about adversarial space capabilities. In February 2024, General Whiting testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) that the PRC and Russia seek to exploit perceived U.S. reliance on space systems through the development of military counterspace capabilities aimed at severely degrading U.S., allied, and partner space and terrestrial systems. In May 2024, the Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee expressed concerns about Russian development of an on-orbit nuclear anti-satellite weapon. For additional background, see CRS Insight IN12420, *U.S. Counterspace Capabilities* and CRS In Focus IF11895, *Space as a Warfighting Domain: Issues for Congress*.

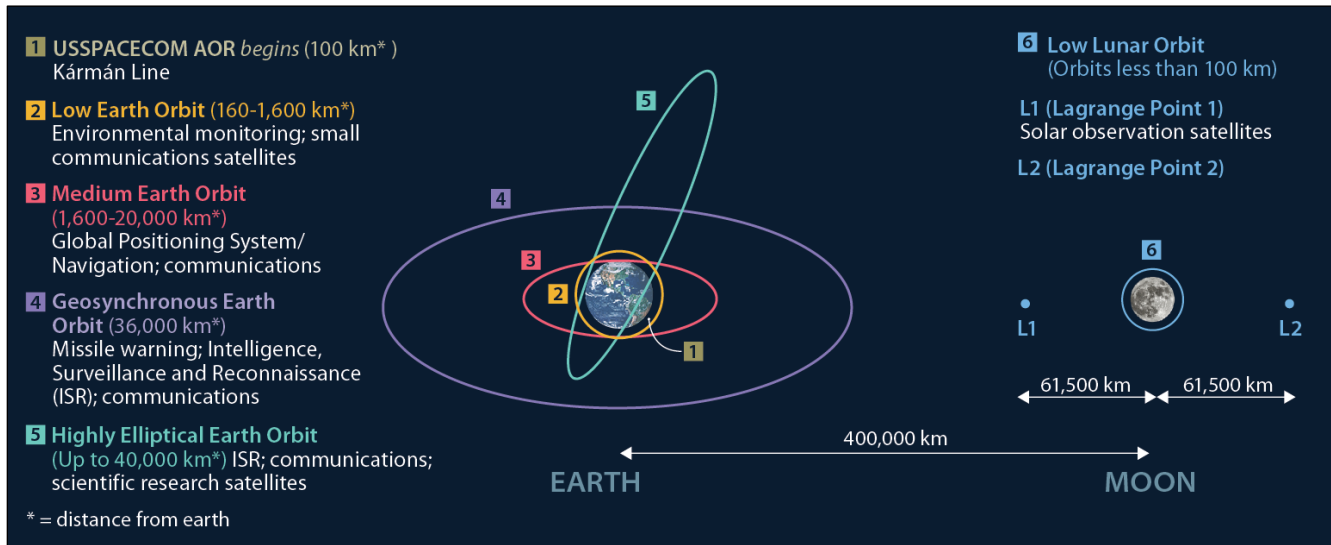
DIA has outlined PRC and Russian pursuit of legally binding international space arms control agreements to curb what Russia “sees as U.S. strength in outer space.” Congress has oversight and accountability mechanisms available to influence such international agreements. For more information, see CRS Legal Sidebar LSB11049, *International Agreements (Part II): Examining Tools for Congressional Influence Over International Instruments*.

Potential Issues for Congress

USSPACECOM Headquarters. Some Members have reportedly stated that President-elect Donald Trump will seek to move USSPACECOM’s headquarters from its current location of Colorado Springs to Huntsville, Alabama, perhaps using an executive order. In January 2021, the DAF selected Redstone Arsenal, in Huntsville, AL, to be USSPACECOM’s headquarters, moving the new command from its provisional location at Peterson SFB in

Colorado Springs. The Biden Administration reversed that decision in July 2023.

Figure 2. USSPACECOM Area of Responsibility



Source: National Aeronautics and Space Administration & Air University

Both Huntsville and Colorado Springs are hubs for space activity. Huntsville is home to Army Space and Missile Defense Command, DOD’s Missile Defense Agency, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration’s Marshall Space Flight Center. Colorado Springs is home to the U.S. Space Force headquarters at Peterson, Schriever SFB, North American Aerospace Defense Command, and U.S. Northern Command. Congress, in Section 2889 of the FY2024 NDAA, P.L. 118-31, limited the use of funds for headquarters construction in Colorado until June 30, 2024, when the DOD Inspector General (IG) and the U.S. Comptroller General were expected to complete new reviews of the decision. These reviews have not been publicly released at the time of this publication. The IG and Government Accountability Office last reviewed the headquarters decision in 2022.

Should the President-elect propose moving the location of the headquarters, or elements thereof, Congress may consider whether to support, oppose, or condition such a relocation. For example, if Congress were to support the move, it could authorize and appropriate funds for such a purpose. If Congress were to oppose the move, it could prohibit the use of funds. If Congress requires more information on the topic before making a decision, it may further limit the use of funding for such a purpose until the aforementioned reports and/or additional information on the matter is provided.

Security Classification Barriers. Maintaining sufficient levels of classification safeguards sensitive national security data and capabilities from adversaries. However, some Members of Congress and DOD senior leaders have expressed concerns regarding the over classification of space-related data and intelligence, and its impact on information sharing and oversight. In Sections 1602 and 7602 of the FY2024 NDAA, P.L. 118-31, Congress introduced reforms to the declassification process, as well as classification reviews of space defense acquisition programs. In January 2024, the Deputy Secretary of

Defense removed some of the classification barriers cited as hindering DOD collaboration with other U.S. government agencies, allies, and industry. The military services are reviewing additional classification changes to allow for more meaningful cooperation. Congress may consider requesting additional information from the services regarding their proposed policy changes before pursuing additional oversight.

Space Launch Infrastructure and Providers. Space launch capabilities are key to USSPACECOM’s ability to augment, reconstitute, and replenish satellites supporting military space missions. The CCMD relies on commercial providers to access space through the National Security Space Launch Program (NSSL), which is conducted by USSF. These launches largely occur at the federal space ranges located at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station, FL, and Vandenberg Space Force Base, CA; these ranges are also used in an array of purely commercial operations.

Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns regarding the ability of federal launch facilities to meet projected defense and commercial space launch demands. The House Armed Services Committee (HASC) has debated a proposal to expand NSSL and payload processing programs to other federal space ranges for the FY2025 NDAA (see H.Rept. 118-529). The HASC has also directed a briefing on the feasibility of alternative launch sites, the outcome of which Congress may consider in whether to modify or expand federal launch facilities.

The bulk of launch vehicles used for defense space missions are provided by two companies—United Launch Alliance and SpaceX. Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns that a dominant Pentagon launch provider might stifle competition in future NSSL bids. Congress could consider whether or not to adopt or encourage certain contracting approaches to promote competition among launch providers. See CRS In Focus IF11531, *Defense Primer: National Security Space Launch*.

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