



How Congress should grade the Space Force doctrine

May 19, 2020 **Peter Garretson** *The Hill*

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Earlier this Spring, the leadership of the U.S. Space Force, the country's newest military branch, announced that it plans to roll out a new doctrine in the near future. But what that doctrine will look like remains to be seen — and Congress, which will be the ultimate arbiter of the document and the vision it contains, needs to ensure that the country gets it right.

In the military, “doctrine” is meant to be an authoritative guidance, a kind of “blessed theory” summarizing what an organization believes to be true about a subject. When it comes to the doctrine of the newly-minted Space Force, the name of the game is space power, and what, exactly, the U.S. should plan to do in this new domain.

Nearly two decades ago, Gen. Simon “Pete” Worden and Maj. John Shaw lamented that in spite of the “pervading influence and compelling importance” of space, there is “little to be found today in the way of coherent space power doctrine and strategy.” Unfortunately, little has changed in the years since, even as the stakes in what has become an emerging economic, military and strategic domain have grown ever higher.

Today, there are high hopes among many on Capitol Hill that the recent formation of a dedicated U.S. Space Force will advance new thinking in this arena. That, however, is by no means inevitable. Unfortunately, the U.S. military has historically proven to be remarkably tone-deaf regarding the changing strategic environment of space — and failed to “think big” about where America needs to go in this new domain. It therefore falls to Congress to force the Pentagon to craft a doctrine for the Space Force that frames national priorities properly.

Fortunately, the U.S. has centuries of experience with what works and what doesn't in the development of new frontiers. From the westward expansion to our development of sea and air power, Americans are truly the world's frontiersmen. As we increasingly look to space as a new frontier, policymakers need to make sure that military planners are considering a number of critical questions:

- Does the new Space Force doctrine overtly tackle the great power competition in space for resources, and the centrality of the growing space economy? There is already a multi-decade strategic competition underway for space primacy between the United States and other nations (like China). In order to position the U.S. to compete militarily, technologically, and for industrial-logistical superiority, our doctrine will need to recognize the competitive nature of the space domain in the years ahead.
- Does the new doctrine provide clarity as to the Space Force's role in space competition? In order for the new Space Force to “be all that it can be,” it will need to be put in the context of America's ambitions as a leader in the emerging multi-trillion-dollar space economy. That won't happen if commercial space is treated solely as a resource to exploit, rather than as a future fount of American prosperity — one that needs to be both accelerated and protected.
- Does it advocate for a strategic offensive in space? China is today pursuing a vigorous grand strategic offensive to industrialize Earth-Moon Space — one that dwarfs American efforts in this critical domain. Real competition with Beijing's vision for space requires us to have the strategic will to contest Chinese efforts, and a clear vision of how to do so.
- Who was consulted? Bureaucracies are notorious for talking to themselves. It therefore bears investigating whether this was a Pentagon-only project, or if a broad array of space leaders (from commercial firms like SpaceX and Blue Origin to agencies such as NASA and the Department of Commerce) had input into its development and helped provide proper context.
- Is this doctrine about national space power? The hallmarks of an effective doctrine would be to address the full effects of military

space power, facilitate commerce, and outline how to advance U.S. interests in the space domain, both in peacetime and in wartime. If the document does not speak to broader American societal ambitions in a vastly expanded sphere of commerce and human activity, it should be rejected.

- Is it visionary? Perhaps the most important question, however, is whether the new Space Force Doctrine properly anticipates the future. In order to be effective, it will need to help develop a “spacemindedness” among military leaders that anticipates the expansion of human industry, economic centers and community into the solar system, as well as how nations are likely to compete over resources and position there.

Doctrines are intended to serve as the fundamental reference, and to shape possibilities in the mind of officers and servicemen. Therefore, getting them right matters a great deal. The same holds true when it comes to space. Depending on how it is developed, the Space Force doctrine will either launch us into a new era of space power or keep us tethered to the launch pad.

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