



Mapping vital US interests beyond Earth orbit

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Though it passed largely unnoticed at the time, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed earlier this Fall between NASA and the U.S. Space Force represents a major forward step in comprehensive national spacepower. It provides strong evidence that the “whole-of-nation” strategy previously developed by the National Space Council is beginning to penetrate two of the country’s most important and well-resourced space bureaucracies. Though the White House has yet to implement the new strategy via an executive order which lays out specific responsibilities for the country’s different space agencies, NASA and the USSF are clearly taking the initiative and adopting a proactive stance toward American spacefaring.

Why is this memorandum significant? Although previous documents have acknowledged the possible expansion of U.S. interests into cislunar space, the MOU is full-throated in its support of this objective. It states that “the reach of USSF’s sphere of interest *will* extend to 272,000 miles and beyond — more than a tenfold increase in range and 1,000-fold expansion in service volume” and that the USSF is organizing, training and equipping to “provide the resources necessary to protect and *defend vital U.S. interests in and beyond Earth-orbit.*”

That formulation, which has been embraced both by the Space Force and by NASA, reflects a consensus that the U.S. has vital interests beyond Earth orbit and continues an important trend by nations to see the value of space in terms that are geo-strategic and geo-economic.

Equally significant is the acknowledgement and formalization of cooperation on planetary defense (defense against asteroid and comet collisions) above and beyond the responsibilities previously designated by the White House. This is a qualitatively new mission, since planetary defense was not directly enumerated in the Space Force doctrine released by the service this summer. The MOU provides guidelines for technology development and collaboration with NASA to reduce our exposure to this existential threat and positions the military branch well for recruiting and public support.

The document also focuses on a grand strategic prize: the burgeoning space economy. It codifies areas of cooperation on “capabilities and practices enabling safe, sustained near-Earth and cislunar operations such as communications; navigation; space structure servicing, assembly, and manufacturing,” space logistical supply, orbital debris mitigation, Space Domain Awareness (SDA) and Near Earth Object (NEO) [asteroid and comets] detection beyond geosynchronous orbit, fundamental science, and search, rescue and recovery operations for human spaceflight. This means that, as NASA expands to enable an industrial economy on the Moon and beyond, the Space Force will be there to ensure safety and security.

As such, both NASA and the Space Force are to be commended for formulating such a forward-looking document, and for releasing it publicly in order to provide reassurance the Space Force is answering the concerns of Congress.

Peter Garretson is a senior fellow in Defense Studies with the American Foreign Policy Council and a strategy consultant who focuses on space and defense. He was previously the director of Air University’s Space Horizons Task Force, America’s think tank for space, and was deputy director of America’s premier space strategy program, the Schriever Scholars. He is the author of Scramble for the Skies: The Great Power Competition to Control the Resources of Outer Space.