

The Formation of the Australian Space Command

The US Space Force as a Blueprint?

SHANAYA J. DE SILVA



Human presence in space began in 1957, and, with society, has been evolving ever since.¹ Competition between state and nonstate actors, rather than cooperation, dominates the strategic environment in space today.² Additionally, economic interests play a major role; modern space competition is not limited to just the military sphere. Contemporary space activity revolves around two poles: the generation and extraction of value from space products and services and space infrastructure and support industries.³ This economic promise creates greater competition among nations.

This article discusses Australia's proposal for a military space division within the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) using the United States, which has already established a military Space Force, as a comparator country. Given that the two nations are similar in terms of political and economic ideologies and practices, and that Australia takes most of its cues from the actions of the United States, the latter seems the most suitable comparator. Using the United States as a comparator additionally allows for an analysis of what has already occurred with the US

Space Force (USSF) to form a prediction about what shape the Australian Space Command might take and what challenges and triumphs it might expect.

United States Space Force

Established on 20 December 2019, the USSF was formed to protect and secure the nation's superiority in the "world's newest war-fighting domain": space.⁴ Although other space ventures and organizations had been previously established, this Space Force allowed for a branch of the military to be dedicated to the defense of America's security, prosperity and access to space, similar to the branches of the military which are dedicated to protecting and securing the air, land, and sea.⁵ Organized under the Department of the Air Force, the Space Force was created in response to the growing threat posed by near-peer competitors in space.⁶ Its key responsibilities include operating and defending military and GPS satellites and ground stations that provide communications, navigation, and Earth observation. Another key responsibility is the tracking of space debris that could interfere with spacecraft or astronauts.

The United States and its position in the globalized world are key to our analysis of why there was a need for the establishment of a Space Force within the Department of Defense, and why now. Amid the Cold War and intense competition between the Soviet Union and the United States, the USSR launched the first artificial satellite, Sputnik, on 4 October 1957 in an attempt to display its superiority, among the competition to develop missiles and other military technologies. This event not only induced fear in the United States, but it intensified the arms race, elevated tensions during this ideological battle between capitalism and communism, and officially inaugurated the space race.⁷

This event induced a greater focus in the United States on space exploration and resulted in the birth of NASA in 1958 under the Eisenhower administration.⁸ What we see today is a new, redefined, drive toward space dominance. At a time when many US adversaries such as China and Russia already had space forces, the need for "American dominance in space" drove the creation of the first new military service in more than 70 years so as to ensure US power.⁹ Today, the Space Force "is responsible for organizing, training, and equipping Space Guardians to conduct global space operations that enhance the way joint and coalition forces fight, while also offering decision makers military options to achieve national objectives."¹⁰

In the post-Cold War era, debates about space focus more on economic opportunities, with the race being between multiple nations with fast-growing economies including China, India, and Japan.¹¹ The collaboration between nuclear and space capabilities has the potential to be destabilizing to a nation's safety.

However, with the threat of nuclear retaliation no longer being a viable deterrent and military operations and even people's day-to-day lives depending so heavily on satellites and space systems, nations are competing to secure the space realm so as to ensure their power, stability, and safety, both in space and on earth.¹²

The USSF is the United States' way of securing space for its interests. Furthermore, although the United States is already established in space, it does not have as much of a head start on its competitors (such as China) as it does in other domains such as sea and air. It is feasible that China could gain headway in this area and threaten US access to space. The AUKUS agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States validates the US need to contain China while encouraging the solidification of a Defence Space Force, doing so not just on a national level, but an international level. To maintain the current world structure and maintain US power, dominating the space domain is necessary. Thus, establishing the Space Force within the Department of Defense ensures that the United States has military capabilities to defend itself in space if need be.

Benefits of the US Space Force

The establishment of the USSF comes with numerous benefits for the United States. It allows for a branch within US defense to specialize in and tackle space-related issues head-on while creating an abundance of new jobs and career paths. Furthermore, it can contribute to the strengthening of the economy and the protection of daily life and military capabilities, which rely so heavily on space.

The Space Force ensures a branch that has a 100 percent focus on space—rather than having personnel in different departments, such as the Air Force, with space expertise—responsible for handling America's position in space.¹³ Space capabilities are important to US national security, and the continuous investment by the government into future capabilities and technologies will allow the United States to dominate in the realm of space.¹⁴ This is realized through the Space Force. This specialization additionally allows the United States to bolster deterrence in a domain where more and more countries and companies are seeking to enter and advance their technologies.¹⁵ However, with more parties entering space, the threat against a nation's space systems, and those of its allies, are continuously increasing. This can be deterred through the establishment of a dedicated Space Force. Instances of jamming or even the theft of satellite communication channels by unauthorized users, such as when the Falun Gong spiritual movement hijacked Chinese television signals during the 2002 World Cup and substituted their own broadcasts, can be effectively and efficiently tackled before

too much harm has been committed when the branch has a 100 percent focus on space.¹⁶

Having a Space Force creates career paths for people who specialize in space.¹⁷ Initially, the Space Force requested a total number of 9,979 personnel, with 6,434 military in the active Space Force, and 3,545 civilian full-time equivalents.¹⁸ During the preliminary stages, personnel from other areas, such as the Air Force, who were in space-related positions, were transferred into the Space Force service.¹⁹ The Space Force framework aimed to establish field units that would execute space-unique functions, which not only created a range of career pathways for existing space staff employed in other areas, but also created new positions, employed more individuals, reduced the unemployment rate of the general population, and provided them with the opportunity to enter the space field. In 2022, the Space Force plans to grow to around 8,000 personnel.²⁰ This includes transfers from the Army, Navy, and Marines, as well as civilian personnel and contractors.²¹ This collective contribution and new demand for employees will not only aid the economy but improve the Space Force and its effectiveness.

Additionally, the Space Force provides the opportunity to invest in and expand the US economy. The space economy is ever changing and growing, and the Space Force has the ability to collaborate with emerging companies with new ideas and technologies to innovate and support the commercialization of the space sector. This will also aid in space acquisitions, which was one of the drivers behind the creation of the Space Force.²²

Space capabilities are woven into the fabric of our daily lives and the Space Force is able to ensure that there are limited disturbances to this. Whether it's space exploration, weather and environment monitoring, navigation and mapping, precision timing for communications and power grid networks, financial transactions, TV, or radio, it's all around us.²³ Such a dependency on space creates a need for a department that is dedicated to protecting space. Thus, it seems imperative to have a specialized force, such as the Space Force, securing and ensuring the protection of US military, commercial, civil, and economic interests. Furthermore, the space domain is still under development. This provides the Space Force with room to grow and adjust its space resources to the evolving dynamic of the domain, with the aim of protecting Americans and their security and economic interests.²⁴

Space capabilities have become essential to the way a modern military conducts operations. During the Gulf war, we saw the first unique enabling role that space could play in a defense setting.²⁵ Satellites allowed US troops outfitted with GPS to quickly push Saddam Hussein's forces out of Kuwait.²⁶ Military action in Afghanistan—from squad-level operations to control of America's nuclear deter-

rent—depended on assets in space.²⁷ Space advancements allow the United States to protect itself and aid its allies on a greater level. The Space Force can elevate this protection even further. When teams are dedicated to achieving specific missions, the United States has the potential to not only fast track their efforts, but to seek out more technologically advanced solutions to their problems, ahead of their competitors.

With the establishment of the Space Force, the United States is able to protect the space capabilities that it is domestically, militarily, and commercially dependent on and make up for the shortcomings of their action toward space.

Drawbacks of the US Space Force

While it has its benefits, the Space Force also has its drawbacks. It can be seen as a waste of resources, as well as a venture that neglects the larger problems it was created to tackle. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the Space Force and using its capabilities to actively weaponize space is also debated.

The Space Force can, in some ways, be considered a waste of resources. There may be no sense in creating another level of bureaucracy when the Air Force is able to handle space-related concerns through the existing Space Command, especially seeing as the Air Force holds about 80 percent of space experts employed by the US military.²⁸ Along with the \$8 billion funding request at the establishment of the Space Force, this venture would have to pull resources from other military branches. Thus, it could be argued that the establishment of the Space Force is hindering the effectiveness of the other military branches by limiting their capabilities.

Thus far, the Space Force has had more of a focus on small details such as insignia and uniforms, rather than large problems such as acquisition, workforce, and space warfare.²⁹ Individuals in the field have raised concerns about the need for more timely advancements of space-related technologies if the United States is to remain a leader on not just the global stage, but the space domain too. Given the budget the Space Force is equipped with, and the fact that it is a separate military service created specifically for space, it has the capabilities to make such advancements. Driving the United States to leadership in this domain will require an acceleration of its technology development so that the nation can thrive and compete with other nations and private companies entering the domain, who employ the latest technology and processes in their space architecture.³⁰

With the evolving environment in space, the Space Force, to beat its competitors, is beginning to weaponize space in line with its missions and capabilities. During the establishment of the Space Force, the Trump administration repeatedly conveyed its understanding of space as a potential war fighting domain. This

homes in on the fact that, although the Space Force was created to protect US satellites and spacecraft from attack, it also serves to protect the United States and its citizens against all space-related conflicts and issues, including war.³¹ Weaponization of space refers to the deployment of anti-satellite counterspace technology designed to achieve space control by attacking an opponent's space support capabilities.³² As a response to other nations such as China and Russia weaponizing space, the United States is doing so, too.³³ This creates a Cold War-like climate of competition in space. Although it may seem inevitable, especially when nations begin to establish their space forces within their Departments of Defense, the weaponization of space can have adverse effects: it could inaugurate a new arms race that would threaten US security in the long run, threaten nonspace powers who may decide to damage ground facilities or communication links used by US space assets, and result in a highly destabilized world where we see a diversion of world resources with continuous conflict, mistrust, and the eminence of weapons of mass destruction.³⁴ Defensive space weapons may not be a solution to providing security to America's critical satellite capabilities.³⁵ The area that was supposed to help protect a nation's citizens may ultimately be responsible for putting their safety at risk.

Australian Space Command

Space is a critical strategic domain for Australia's civil and military interests but is increasingly contested and competitive.³⁶ Set to be established in early 2022, Australia announced the RAAF space division, with Air Vice-Marshal Catherine Roberts elected as its inaugural head, to build Australia's sovereign space capabilities as a means of securing, "protecting, and building Australia's future."³⁷ This division will employ personnel from all areas within defense and, importantly, will be a collaboration between the Army, Navy, and RAAF rather than an entirely separate entity, reflecting the importance of the space domain.³⁸

Australia and the United States have long been allies, with the 1951 ANZUS Treaty formalizing their relationship.³⁹ In 2020, the US Department of Defense released a statement regarding its Space Strategy, which is to secure, deter, and compete with adversaries in space who, according to the United States, have made space a war-fighting domain.⁴⁰ This strategy emphasizes the importance of engaging with allies, such as Australia, in the contested domain of space. In the Australian point of view, it is beneficial to strengthen its cooperation in space with the United States and other Five Eyes allies and create the Australian Space Command in a similar, complementary, image to the USSF.⁴¹ Similar to the United States, Australia's Space Command will not be separate or independent of

the nation's military. It will have strong associations with the Department of Defense and Air Force.⁴²

Australia's geographical position presents several unique opportunities for contributing to collective space domain awareness among its allies and partners.⁴³ However, there are many other factors contributing to Australia's decision to enter this sphere. It is a nation that needs capabilities that directly contribute to outcomes in space as a contested domain.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it was determined that increasing the use of space is "both an essential enabler of military operations and a warfighting domain in its own right" in the Department of Defense's annual report.⁴⁵ Therefore, although it strongly denounces the militarization of space, Australia, like the United States, recognizes the significance of space to its military, economic, and domestic interests.⁴⁶ Spaceward expansion allows Australia to develop its space technology capabilities and space domain awareness to better track and identify threats in space, while protecting Australians' civil and commercial use of space.

As a country that invests significantly in its defense, with 3 percent of total defense spending for the next 10 years dedicated to the space division, it needs to keep up with developments in defense technology.⁴⁷ Thus, having a dedicated space command will bring Australia into line with other nations such as Canada, India, France, and Japan who share a similar structure. Along with the recent AUKUS agreement, this will also place Australia in a better position to not only protect itself and its interests against adversaries within the region, but also to contribute to strengthening its relationship with its allies and defending their shared interests and positions in space against their competitors.

Potential Benefits of an Australian Space Command

A Space Command within the Department of Defense will bring a range of benefits. It will possess the ability to secure and protect Australian assets in space, while improving space diplomacy and strengthening Australia's relations with its allies with shared interests in space.

The new space division will secure as well as protect. It will focus on protecting Australian assets, such as its communication and observation satellites, while keeping an eye on space debris and helping people on the ground investigate further, should a suspicious collision occur.⁴⁸ Similar to the United States, the Space Command will have the ability to protect civil use of space as well as strengthen its military operations. It proactively protects Australia from conflict originating from space, and a dedicated division within the Department of Defense will ensure that it is able to defend and protect Australians and their best interests. The majority of Australia's military capabilities rely heavily on space,

such as GPS satellites that facilitate essential positioning, navigation, and timing functions crucial for modern military control. Without access to such capabilities, the Australian Defense Force wouldn't be able to carry out operational missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁹

Having a space division within the military also plays a role in space diplomacy. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which governs how nations use space, was primarily developed as a means of restraint for how nations carry themselves in the realm of space.⁵⁰ However, over the past decade, countries have begun to stray from this "strategic restraint." A space division in the military could allow Australia to join its allies "and temper the greater powers away from what's happening, and back towards strategic restraint."⁵¹

Australia's decision to establish a Space Command within its defense, in tandem with its recent collaboration with the United States and United Kingdom in the AUKUS agreement, allows it to feel more secure and connected with its allies. The sense of security is reinforced by the shared interests between the three nations and their willingness to help protect each other's interests. AUKUS solidifies the decision for a space command and resemblance to the USSF works in its favor, as it is a structure that the United States is familiar with. One can assume that, considering both space divisions in each of the nations reside within the department of defense, each nation is preparing for a weaponized space domain in which it will have to protect and defend its own interests and "OutSpace" their competitors.⁵² This also allows for greater integration between Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Five Eyes nations.

Additionally, given Australia's partnership with the United States and the latter's lack of situational space coverage in the southern hemisphere, the establishment of an Australian Space Command would heighten US interest in Australia as a partner.⁵³ Furthermore, the AUKUS agreement solidifies the US-Australia relationship and allows for more trust when going into an unprecedented and unpredictable climate in the space domain.

Potential Drawbacks of the Australian Space Command

While every venture has its benefits, it is necessary to also consider the potential drawbacks. The establishment of the Space Command within defense could both encourage the militarization of space and potentially lead to the duplication of redundant capabilities among allied nations, especially where the structure is similar to that of Australia's allies. Additionally, this venture could have a negative effect on the Australian government's relationship with private equipment and resource contractors who are responsible for providing equipment and resources towards the establishment of the Space Command. Without them, Australia

would not be capable of carrying out the research and missions required to secure its place in space.

One of the key points that is repeatedly publicized in connection to the introduction of this new division is that Defence does not encourage the militarization of space.⁵⁴ Unlike other countries such as China and Russia that utilize their technologies to attack enemy satellites, the establishment of the space division in the Australian military, along with the \$7 billion dedicated to it, is Australia's way of keeping up with the developments across the world so that they can defend and protect its lands and peoples.⁵⁵ However, the question of how practical this claim—that the space division is not a move toward the militarization of space—is one that lingers throughout the discussions about the new venture. Specifically considering the proposed Space Command is the result of a collaboration of the collective defense departments and will be staffed by military personnel trained to think and act in the name of defense and security.⁵⁶ Given this line of reasoning, if Australia were to adopt the stance that space is to be a war fighting domain, it sends a conscious signal to competitors that any point of conflict can be taken into space, or even begin in space. Further, by adopting such a stance, Australia would be sending a provoking signal to China, which would threaten Australia's safety in the region. It could also result in a breach of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which was intended to guarantee that space shall be used for “exclusively peaceful purposes.”⁵⁷

Moreover, the existence of an Australian Space Command could be problematic if it means that several allies possess duplicate capabilities. Especially given the recent AUKUS agreement, it can be expected that the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom will frequently collaborate in a range of areas in the future. Thus, it would make sense that, specifically when concerning a domain as unpredictable as space, each nation is able to possess its own unique, and specialized capabilities. When the time comes, the nations will be able to represent a well-rounded amount of power to protect their citizens and secure their shared interests in space and the world. Furthermore, the USSF is underpinned by a doctrine of space superiority. This concept may not be something Australia can, or should, aspire to, given its capabilities and the consequences of such actions within its region. Thus, the collaboration between these nations in space should be integrated by design, and Australia, like the United Kingdom, should aim to add value to the already established ventures of the United States, rather than try and mimic what they are doing.⁵⁸ Given the AUKUS agreement and Australia's ties to the United States because of it, Australia should ensure that its space capabilities complement—rather than clash with—those of the United States. This collective effort, with its roots in preventing China from dominating the new domain of

space, provides security to all nations involved. However, it could have consequences on Australia that the United States and United Kingdom may not face, as Australia resides in the same regional domain as China. Thus, support from its allies will be very important to Australia if China chooses to escalate and retaliate against Australia because of any supposed threats to China's position in space.

Setting up a military space division means that there will be a lot of money floating around as the government hires contractors to provide the equipment and technologies they need to set up this new division. Once the government releases the contract, the question is whether or not the Australian government will maintain its interest in the space division and honor its commitment to contract these companies. If the government creates a lot of activity in the market, but then support for the area disappears, companies who were expecting to sell are now left abandoned due to lack of funds, facing negative impacts to their economic interests. This is a big problem in countries like Australia and the United States where election cycles are democratic, creating more upticks, declines, and flows in terms of policy.⁵⁹ This creates a volatile environment for companies who may find it hard to rely upon government contracts that could potentially disappear following an election.

Conclusion

Ultimately, when dealing with space, the benefits and drawbacks of any venture in this domain cannot be viewed in a bubble. Considering our immense dependency on space, it is necessary to take note of the impact an action relating to space will have on all the different aspects of our lives and societal structures that are connected to space. Thus, with the fast-evolving environment of the space domain, it is important that Australia evolves with it to ensure the safety of its people and interests. However, given that the proposal of the Space Command is very new, and its establishment is yet to occur, collaborating with its allies such as the United States will play an important role in the effectiveness of the Space Command and the future of Australia. Additionally, Australia should work toward an integrated approach in space with its allies and commit to this domain so as to see real, long-term results emerge from its ideas and efforts. Admittedly, this article only examines the United States as a comparator for Australia to estimate the potential benefits and drawbacks of establishing a Space Command within its waters. There are many other countries with military space entities that future research could explore and analyze in conjunction with the evolving events in Australia and its vision of a space-involved future. ✪

Shanaya J. De Silva

Ms. De Silva is a researcher/writer for the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers.

Notes

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