



## ***ENVISIONING AN AMERICAN FIRST POLICY IN OUTER SPACE***

BY RIMON TANVIR HOSSAIN

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The Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) recently hosted the workshop “*Rethinking Strategic Competition in Space and Space in Strategic Competition*”, where panel-led sessions addressed how the nature of competition in space has changed in recent years. Leading think tank experts, space officials from allied governments, U.S. commercial space industry leaders and other space policy practitioners shed light on how strategic competition in space has evolved, in addition to how the U.S. should formulate and implement its space strategy. Given the nuances of the topics covered by the panels, the perspectives presented in this summary are mine alone and not representative of the views of CGSR.

The second Trump Administration has revitalized discourse on multiple initiatives to thrust the U.S. towards achieving space superiority at a time when China has been asserting itself as a fast follower. Long before the establishment of the U.S. Space Force in 2019, multiple episodes of confrontation between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union occurred since the 1957 Sputnik launch, such as the 1991 Gulf War and the 2018 near-collision with a Russian satellite, consolidated the role of space as a warfighting domain.

However, as of 2025, the People’s Republic of China has made inroads in space that have significantly, if not decisively, surpassed the U.S. in space superiority. Satellite production, grasp over emerging technologies, a fast-growing space bureaucracy and an immense domestic space industrial base all attest

to China’s formidable status as a space power, followed closely by Russia. However, the U.S. space commercial sector, in addition to new momentum by the government between the executive order to develop the Golden Dome of America and grow the U.S. Space Force as a branch of the military to establish dominance in space, ushers in hope at a time when the need to reassert U.S. dominance in space alongside allied governments against the pacing momentum of China and Russia.

### **China as a Fast Follower**

When CCP officials met with former U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Anchorage, Alaska in March 2021, they discussed Beijing’s space concerns, including the Boeing X-37 reusable robotic spacecraft and SpaceX’s expansive array of orbital assets. In line with their 2049 Chinese Dream goals on rejuvenation at the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), developing the space industry and becoming a space power on the world stage is a stated goal. In pursuit of strengthening the Chinese military, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) sees space as a domain of military preeminence, with allies and partners to be coerced against the U.S. in order to achieve their goal of being a world-class power by 2049.

The “East is rising, the West is falling” is a common CCP mantra popularized by Xi Jinping in 2020, encapsulating their embrace of the power transition in strategic terms, where China believes space and time are on their side. The CCP thus hopes to sustain a fundamental pace with milestones in space such as the BeiDou navigation satellite system, ongoing lunar missions, the clandestine Shenlong (“Divine Dragon”) space plane and China’s first “orbital test vehicle” (OTV), which was a secret launch of a reusable experimental spacecraft in September 2020 as part of Shelong. Considering the famous catch of a “Super Heavy” booster Starship rocket launched by SpaceX on October 13, 2024, China still seems to be ahead of this historic and phenomenal moment for the U.S.

China arguably maintains exaggerated threat perceptions of U.S. capabilities, despite the U.S.

perceiving itself to be in an inflection point, seeing China as a fast follower sometime between 2018 and 2023. In fact, the PLA ran a 2020 simulation where they predicted that Starlink has a capability to intercept 350 ICBMs with a 100% success rate. However, the gulf between the U.S. and China in space and satellite capabilities are still vast as Starlink is active in over 100 countries outside the U.S., whereas China's SatNet Guowang parallel to provide low-Earth orbit satellite internet megaconstellation internet service globally still hasn't been launched outside the Chinese mainland.

### **Need for Credible Red Lines**

As the 2027 projected Chinese invasion of Taiwan nears, the U.S. must remain steadfast in its commitment to defend Taiwan. No U.S. President can walk away from an attack on Taiwan for reasons ranging from security commitments in the Indo-Pacific, commercial interests in the South China Sea and the potential domino effects from U.S. failure to protect its allies. The particular risks of a U.S. aircraft carrier getting hit and sunk, will undeniably escalate to a world war, which will lead to sacrifices made by everyday citizens not seen in generations. The need for credible red lines is imperative, which includes denying space to the adversary and limited escalation. The Golden Dome still has no objective architecture, but the prospect of a defense architecture that integrates space-based interceptors (SBIs) like the "Brilliant Pebbles," which was discontinued in the 90s following U.S. President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, is back on the table following President Trump's Jan. 27 executive order. The executive order calls for an "Iron Dome for America," which will serve as a next-generation missile defense shield to protect the U.S. homeland through the "development and deployment of proliferated space-based interceptors capable of boost-phase intercept."

Both Europe and Japan are home to strong emerging space commercial sectors as well as government bureaucracies to further facilitate them. Similar to how NASA enabled space innovation since its founding in 1958, the Government of Japan established its own independent administrative institution, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency

(JAXA) on October 1, 2003. Since JAXA's founding, Japan has been home to thriving space companies such as Ursa Major Technologies, Interstellar Technologies and Sirius Technologies. Japan is also a participant of the U.S.-led Artemis Accords and maintains the 3rd largest space budget in the world at \$953 million USD, which is roughly one-third of the Chinese space budget.

Allies perceive a strong U.S. posture and resulting credibility to deliver on security guarantees as an incentive to both prevent the prospect of a nuclear satellite and preserve the stable use of outer space. Similarly, European partners are also committed to U.S. global security architecture including emerging space capabilities with their own patchwork of defense initiatives. The fact that Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine was propped up by China through diplomatic, economic and technological support consolidates Europe's alignment with the U.S. on future defense cooperation including developments in space.

### **Conclusion**

The United States has the best team, track record and technology to sustain its lead in space, but the recent inability to execute policy planning into practice is costing Washington its lead. However, a lack of clarity on objectives behind U.S. institutions like the U.S. Space Force, Golden Dome of America and integrated private-public partnerships with commercial space companies, prevent Washington from reaching its full potential in space. Gauging adversary calculus must be met with an infrastructure that coordinates the proper levers within the government to unleash American innovation for strategic stability in the face of a rising China. Allies have committed and continue to deliver the momentum required to have supplementary space capabilities of their own and multilateral frameworks like the Artemis Accords pose a significant gap which Beijing has yet to fill. Washington's intent to cement its seven-decade leadership in space must be followed through with the requisite marshaling of resources and expertise. What was done in the past can be done in the future with vision and persistence.

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