



The Mitchell Forum

Are Guardians Warfighters?

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About the Forum

This paper was submitted for a forthcoming debate paper series from The Aerospace Corporation's Center for Space Policy and Strategy (CSPS). The debate paper series will feature essays on key national security space issues to clarify these debates and make them accessible to a broader audience. CSPS is dedicated to shaping the future of space by providing nonpartisan research and strategic analysis to decisionmakers, and to informing broader public discussions of space policy.

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Guardians ARE Warfighters

Make no mistake, Guardians are warfighters—military personnel organized, trained, and equipped to deliver decisive battlespace effects. In fact, Guardians are exactly the warfighters we need for great power competition with China and beyond. As Marine Corps Lt Gen Matthew Glavy recently explained, “No space, no chance.”¹ This is why the United States Space Force exists—the space capabilities on which both modern coalition operations and modern life depend are threatened and indeed under attack. We need Guardians to proactively protect those capabilities and defend our fielded forces from adversary space-enabled attack. We need Guardians who understand the threats and operational environment, who are trained and ready to employ defensive and offensive space operations, and who understand what's at stake if they fail. This mission requires a warfighting ethos. It also demands that Guardians be respected as warfighters. Their contribution is essential for securing the capabilities and synchronizing the effects needed to deter a conflict with China, or win a conflict if deterrence fails.



Figure 1: A U.S. Space Force Guardian from the 527th Space Aggressor Squadron (SAS) conducts Global Positioning System (GPS) electromagnetic interference training with a GPS electromagnetic attack system at Schriever Space Force Base, Colorado. Part of the squadron's mission is to address emerging space threats and prepare U.S. and allied forces to fight in and through a contested, degraded, and operationally-limited (CDO) environment.

Credit: U.S. Space Force photo by Ethan Johnson

Warfare, and by extension warfighters, has always evolved. Over the centuries, warfare expanded from hand-to-hand combat to engagement at a distance with projectiles, to explosives and firepower, to airpower, and now to spacepower. While more modern forms of warfare can have a devastating asymmetric effect on older forms, these expansions do not invalidate or make obsolete the previous forms of warfare, as even today in Ukraine and Gaza

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we see hand-to-hand fighting.² However, with the passage of time and technology, it is abundantly clear that warfighters are able to have increasingly powerful effects at greater range. Consider the global power inherent via ICBMs and more recently with remote effects via cyber operations or through remotely operated aircraft able to strike targets around the world thanks to satellite communication. The reality that “space is a warfighting domain now” means it is time to expand our understanding of warfare and warfighters beyond a global scale to include the military professionals organized, trained, and equipped to meet threats in space—Guardians.³

Moreover, in the ongoing competition with China, simplistic black and white views of war and peace are insufficient for the complex and nuanced competition continuum we face.⁴ The age-old observation of Sun Tzu that “the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting” is more relevant than ever.⁵ Both sides are now trying to achieve their strategic objectives by taking actions with all elements of national power in every domain, including military actions associated with space. Having a robust space posture with a credible means of projecting defensive and offensive effects to, in, and from space is essential to deterring conflict. By denying our potential adversaries tempting targets and opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities, the Space Force is actively preventing competition from escalating to crisis or conflict.

It is paramount China recognize the warfighting capabilities of Guardians as a credible force with a sufficient capacity to secure victory—that is the bedrock of effective deterrence. The same recognition and respect should also come from members of the U.S. defense establishment and the public at large. Guardians today are delivering decisive effects



Figure 2: Guardians stand in a delta formation at Ramstein Air Base. U.S. Space Forces Europe and Africa works with NATO Allies and partners to integrate space efforts to enhance security and stability and bolster key regional partnerships.

Credit: U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Madelyn Keech

Recognition and support for the warfighting power of Guardians are critical to ensure the highest priority is given to the resources and policies the Space Force needs to succeed.

to disrupt adversary plans and threats. Each architectural and operational adjustment Guardians make denies China's military planning and strategies to catch the United States off guard or create a window of opportunity for Chinese advantage. Further, giving Guardians options to exercise the ability to project offensive space effects will present complex, cross-domain challenges that would prove too dynamic for an adversary to counter. China understands strength, which means the best way to deter war is for the United States to have the ability to deliver a decisive combination of defensive and offensive space effects capable of winning a space war. Within the United States, recognition and support for the warfighting power of Guardians are also critical to ensure the highest priority is given to the resources and policies the Space Force needs to succeed.

If Guardians are relegated to only providing supporting services to other domain warfighters, those "supporting services" will remain unprotected and tempting targets that would place U.S. forces at greater risk and make a conflict more likely.

To best deter a major conflict, the national security community must recognize Guardians as more than supporting enablers to other domains. For decades under the USAF, when we assumed space was a peaceful domain, space missions became an integral element to enhance the effectiveness and lethality of warfighters in terrestrial domains. "Integration" was the direction with little attention paid to "defense" or "protection" of those space services or the ability to attack adversary space systems. Recognizing the tremendous military advantage the U.S. space enterprise presented, adversaries in recent years have developed their own space systems and weapons to attack our space capabilities. Now we must

respond to the reality of space as a contested domain. As an independent branch of the military, the Space Force and its Guardians must be unleashed to develop, field, and, when necessary, employ a variety of methods to defend our capabilities and deny China or other adversaries the ability to threaten our fielded forces with space-enabled attacks. Only by exploring a full set of offensive options beyond the current counter-communication system, to include space-to-ground engagement, can we develop the capabilities, tactics, and strategies necessary to win a peer conflict—and thus establish our best hope of deterring that conflict.⁶ If Guardians are relegated to only providing supporting services to other domain warfighters, those "supporting services" will remain unprotected and tempting targets that would place U.S. forces at greater risk and make a conflict more likely.

To be clear, this is not some far-off future desire: it is a necessity today. China is actively testing against our systems to identify vulnerabilities and responses. Any weakness will bolster China's perception that attacking space capabilities is the best way to counter the U.S. advantage and ultimately supplant the United States as a global leader. That perception could switch drastically if Guardians are universally viewed as the warfighters they are. Fortunately, the Space Force has recognized this and is establishing the warfighting ethos and capabilities needed through a concerted effort along the traditional service lines of organize, train, and equip. Collectively, these actions better prepare Guardians for conflict and send a clear message to China about the determination and posture of the United States to respond to hostility.

The Space Force is clearly organizing itself with warfighting in mind and recently made organizational adjustments specifically to address the warfighting domain of space. For



Figure 3: A USSF Guardian from Space Delta 3 – electromagnetic warfare, demonstrates a feed swap on a Giggasat FA-150 antenna at Peterson Space Force Base, CO. The antenna is used to aid in detecting and identifying electromagnetic interference, and Space Delta 3 is one of two provisional Integrated Mission Deltas stood-up to strengthen unity of command for readiness and promote unity of effort for capability development.

Credit: U.S. Space Force photo by Airman 1st Class Brooke Wise

example, Integrated Mission Deltas (IMDs) combine some functions of acquisition with operations and are intended to give operational commanders authority over all aspects of mission readiness: personnel, training, equipment, and sustainment.⁷ IMDs also can provide an avenue to accelerate the development and fielding of new capabilities for combat-ready forces. Another significant example is the establishment of the 75th Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Squadron as the first Space Force targeting squadron.⁸ This unit will enable joint attack of adversary space systems posing a threat to our forces and interests. Most recently, the Space Force recently established Space Forces-Space, a dedicated service component to present forces to SPACECOM, the unified combatant command responsible for operations in the space domain.⁹ They have also stood up service components to INDOPACOM, US Forces Korea, CENTCOM, EUCOM, and AFRICOM, with more in various stages of planning.

The Space Force is also training its Guardians to be warfighters. The Space Training and Readiness Command (STARCOM) is leading key efforts on this front. First, they are updating doctrine to highlight the ramifications of space as a warfighting domain.¹⁰ This provides a foundational education as well as an opportunity for Guardians to advance their thinking on the subject. STARCOM is also establishing a combat training range to expose Guardians to warfighting scenarios and threats. Significant investments in Operational Test and Training Infrastructure (OTTI) will allow Guardians to hone their skills and develop new tactics, techniques, and procedures to respond and counter emerging threats.¹¹

Finally, the Space Force is focused on equipping Guardians with capabilities designed for a warfighting environment. Unlike the legacy space systems designed for an uncontested domain, the Space

Force is demonstrating and fielding new capabilities at unprecedented rates specifically intended for warfighting. Spearheaded by Space Systems Command (SSC), Space Development Agency (SDA), and Space Rapid Capabilities Office (Space RCO), activities like Victus Nox, the Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture (PWSA), and the Satellite Communications Augmentation Resource (SCAR) are intended to assure space capabilities are ready for warfighting missions.¹²

As Lt Gen Glavy emphasized, “I’m telling you right now: We don’t win the space domain? Don’t even bother.”¹³

Guardians are warfighters and the very ones we need for the realities of the ongoing struggle with China and other competitors. Respecting this is not an optional endeavor. This is a core facet of what is needed to deter adversaries and prevail in an overt conflict if necessary. Guardians typify the latest evolution in what it means to be a warfighter, and the Space Force is taking the steps to organize, train, and equip them for war. By demonstrating that the Space Force has the will, capability, and capacity to respond to any threat, Guardians are fighting for peace. Yes, Guardians are warfighters. 🌟

Endnotes

- 1 Colin Demarest, “[US must dominate in space to win future wars, Marine Corps’ Glavy says.](#)” *Defense News*, December 11, 2023.
- 2 “[Russia-Ukraine Fighting Devolves Into Hand-to-Hand Combat.](#)” *Voice of America*, March 5, 2023; and Peter Beaumont, “[As their soldiers fight hand to hand in Gaza, Israelis wonder about the endgame.](#)” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2023.
- 3 Secretary of the Air Force Public Affairs, “[Kendall highlights space’s importance, need to ‘transform’ operations and thinking for the domain.](#)” *U.S. Air Force News*, April 5, 2022.
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- 5 Eric Jackson, “[Sun Tzu’s 31 Best Pieces Of Leadership Advice.](#)” *Forbes*, May 23, 2014.
- 6 Space and Missile Systems Center Public Affairs, “[Counter Communications System Block 10.2 achieves IOC, ready for the warfighter.](#)” *U.S. Space Force News*, March 13, 2020.
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- 8 David Roza, “[Space Force Gets Its First Targeting Squadron. Here’s What It Will Do.](#)” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, August 17, 2023.
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- 10 Charles Rivezzo, “[STARCOM Publishes Foundational Doctrine on Intelligence, Operations.](#)” *U.S. Space Force News*, July 31, 2023.
- 11 Charles Rivezzo, “[STARCOM CD highlights Operational Test and Training Infrastructure as a priority.](#)” *U.S. Air Force News*, November 30, 2023.
- 12 Space Systems Command Office of Public Affairs (SSC/PA), “[Space Systems Command successfully launches VICTUS NOX for U.S Space Force: Sets new Tactically Responsive Space record.](#)” media release, September 14, 2023; Space Development Agency, “[SDA Layered Network of Military Satellites now known as ‘Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture’.](#)” *U.S. Space Force News*, January 23, 2023; and “[Space Rapid Capabilities Office awards \\$1.4B effort to BlueHalo.](#)” *U.S. Space Force*, May 24, 2022.
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