

Traversing the Kármán Line

Mitigating Potential Air-Space Friction

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ISSUE

The establishment of the U.S. Space Force (USSF) within the Department of the Air Force (DAF) presents an opportunity to revisit air-space integration at present and in the future. A recent RAND research effort sought to understand the impact of ongoing organizational changes on air-space integration and operations. This previous effort identified little U.S. Air Force (USAF)-USSF friction. The same analysis also found that a complex space organizational landscape within the U.S. government (USG) affects the DAF, given the DAF's lead role for space within the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). Such external conditions create the potential for future internal USAF-USSF friction as the role of space and related organizational responsibilities evolve within the USG. Therefore, continued DAF efforts to focus on air-space integration and mitigate potential future friction remain important. As a follow-on to that analysis, this research effort focused on mitigating potential air-space friction and laying the foundation for long-term air-space integration. In particular, the objective of this report is to identify potential friction points and develop options that the DAF, USAF, and USSF might take to avoid, manage, or lessen the impact of future friction. This report presents the results of that effort by describing the insights gained from a set of workshops and interviews with airmen and guardians across the DAF.



APPROACH

We facilitated and organized two structured workshops in January 2023 on air-space integration and mitigation options for potential frictions. The workshops brought together DAF stakeholders to identify and understand potential air-space friction and develop potential options that the DAF, USSF, and USAF might take to avoid, manage, or lessen the impact of future friction to ensure effective integration. Participants also discussed the effectiveness of ongoing efforts and how the USAF can better support space. We also conducted focused interviews in March 2023 with select USAF officers to understand potential frictions, mitigations, and how the USAF can best support the USSF. These interviews further informed where integration with space counterparts happens currently, potential air-space frictions, and ways to improve USSF-USAF integration.



CONCLUSIONS

- In some areas, USAF-USSF integration is working well. For example, some workshop participants and interviewees noted the effective integration of Headquarters Air Force's programming efforts, in which USAF-USSF teams are currently collocated to develop a resource allocation plan for air and space forces. However, there are areas that require continued attention, such as professional military education and training, programming and budgeting, operations, long-term strategic planning, and space decisionmaking and understanding. Even though programming and budgeting was highlighted as an example of effective integration, some workshop participants and interviewees saw areas needing improvement to ensure integration continues over the long term while the services evolve and potentially diverge in some respects.
- In addition, multiple organizational frictions or challenges exist external to the DAF that complicate air-space integration efforts, such as between the DAF and U.S. combatant commands, defense and intelligence agencies, commercial space providers, and allies. These organizational frictions or challenges are associated with information sharing, who executes space operations, the prioritization of joint space requirements, and the integration of commercial and allied space capabilities.
- The establishment of the USSF, U.S. Space Command, and other changes in how DoD organizes for space (e.g., the recent organizational shift of the Space Development Agency from the Office of the Secretary of Defense into USSF) will continue to affect the development and fielding of space capabilities and forces, the execution of operations, and how services and combatant commands unite service components into a joint force. These major organizational changes are still unfolding and will have implications for the DAF. DAF senior leaders will have to navigate and understand these changes to inform its approach to long-term air-space integration.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Secretary of the Air Force should establish a DAF-level strategic process to identify air-space integration priorities for the DAF.
- The DAF should establish a DAF-level integration office to ensure DAF air-space integration over the long term.
- Developing multidomain expertise for airmen and guardians should remain a priority for the USAF and the USSF.
- The DAF should improve air-space decisionmaking and understanding within the USAF and the USSF.



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