
Leveraging a Whole-of-Government Approach to Drive Space Policy Leadership

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Creating a national space policy needs to be a whole-of-government process that integrates perspectives, capabilities, and interests from across the federal government. Since the 1950s, every U.S. administration has had an interagency process for creating national space policy, although in many cases, it was not a separate or unique process solely for outer space issues. In 2016, the Trump administration revived the National Space Council (NSpC) to formalize a separate space policy process and raise its visibility within the federal bureaucracy and the public. An executive branch-level coordination forum for space policy, like the NSpC, can ensure that perspectives, capabilities, and interests from across the federal government are coordinated within the space policy process.

Background

Understanding how, and why, governments choose a course of action on an issue is one of the enduring problems in public policy and public administration. Policy decisions on dual-use technology, such as those involved in many space activities, are particularly challenging as they require balancing the national security aspects with the potential societal and economic benefits. Additionally, as space activities and use of space-derived services have expanded in recent decades, the number of federal entities with a role in space policy has also increased, driving the need for efficiency in inter-agency coordination. There is a need for a mechanism at the federal level that brings together multiple different agencies and departments to deliberate, debate, and set U.S. national policy on how space capabilities are developed and used.

The National Space Council (NSpC) could be such a mechanism. The Council was established by Congress during the transition to the George H.W. Bush administration as a reorganization of the then-dormant National Aeronautics and Space Council. Chaired by the Vice President, the NSpC is typically composed of Cabinet-level agencies with roles related to space. Subsequent administrations decided not to staff or use the NSpC, preferring instead to use the National Security Council (NSC) or National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) run by the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) as the top-level interagency coordination body for space policy. The first Trump administration revived the NSpC by staffing it, using it to coordinate a set of national space policy decisions, and holding periodic public meetings to discuss space policy issues. The Biden administration maintained the NSpC and its staffed office.



Current Policy and Gaps or Shortcomings

In particular, during the first Trump administration, the revived NSpC has largely been successful in establishing an efficient mechanism for discussing, debating, and finalizing national space policy. During the first Trump administration, the NSpC held eight formal meetings, whereas only three formal meetings were held during the Biden administration. Key achievements of the NSpC during the first Trump administration included issuing four major space policy decisions (supported by formal space policy directive documents) that reestablished the Moon as the near-term human spaceflight goal, directed an overhaul of the regulatory framework for oversight of U.S. commercial space activities, established the first-ever U.S. national policy on space traffic management, and laid the foundation for the establishment of the U.S. Space Force. During the Biden administration, the NSpC and its staff played a key role in developing recommendations for oversight of novel commercial space activities, coordinating and publishing the December 2021 United States Space Priorities Framework policy document and reforming space-related export control policies.

The National Space Council has been successful in increasing the political priority and public visibility of space policy, a key component of ensuring needed action on space sustainability challenges. Its function in providing an executive branch-wide coordination and decision forum, supported by dedicated personnel, for major space policy actions has helped create a whole-of-government approach to space policy. In the absence of an alternative executive branch mechanism for all-of-government coordination, the NSpC provides a model that has proven to be productive and successful under the previous Trump administration. Whatever modality is chosen, it is important that there be an effective executive branch-level coordination forum for space policy to continue to address pressing space policy needs across the government. ●

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Policy Recommendations

→ Keep an executive branch coordination mechanism for space policy, such as the National Space Council.

Given the increasing strategic and economic importance of the space sector, it is important to ensure there is a high-level coordination of federal policy for this domain. The NSpC, or another similar coordinating mechanism, should be implemented as the main body for developing national space policy and should be staffed with experts from inside and outside the U.S. government, specifically those who understand the interagency process and the importance of space. It would also be beneficial to consider ways to include the Federal Communications Commission in NSpC discussions, when relevant, to enhance the coordination of policy.