

# Military Space Cooperation in Support of Competition in the Indo-Pacific

When making friends, the sky's the limit and space is the place

by Maj Christopher A. "Pink Sheets" Lowe

One of the keynotes in the *2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS)* is the repeated use of "Allies and partners," stated no less than 117 times.<sup>1</sup> Concerning the space domain, the *NDS* mentions allies and partners only in the context of "encouraging them to pursue ground- and space-based sensor systems" for the purposes of integrated air and missile defense in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> The allies and partners specifically mentioned are Japan, Australia, and the Republic of Korea. The *2020 Defense Space Strategy (DSS)* mentions cooperation with allies and partners as two of its four lines of effort, however, it does not specify any nation in particular.<sup>3</sup> Missing from the *NDS* and *DSS* space partnership initiatives are key countries such as India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Palau.

These nations are key partners in the competition with the People's Republic of China and will be vital in the event of a crisis or open conflict. Current U.S. policy concerning military space partnerships limits the ability to support key partner nations from and within the space domain and limits the ability of these nations to support the joint or coalition force that will be attempting to persist and fight inside the first island chain. To maximize our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to compete

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against adversary nations, the United States needs to promote space cooperation policy that focuses on establishing bi- and multi-lateral military space partnerships, establishing military liaisons and foreign exchange programs, and reviewing and adjusting classifications of space capabilities for cooperation.

In concert with other diplomatic and economic efforts to establish, repair,

region between the United States and the People's Republic of China has been the influx of foreign investment capital into the region. Key countries, such as Palau, which have historically granted the United States "uniquely extensive defense and security access in their sovereign territories," are coming under increasing diplomatic and economic pressure from China that threatens

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and continue positive relationships with partners in the Pacific, the United States should promote a space cooperation policy that focuses on establishing bilateral and multi-lateral military space partnerships. A major part of the competition in the Indo-Pacific

to undercut the special relationships and military access necessary to deter and defeat Chinese aggression through programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>4</sup>

Establishing military space cooperation agreements can be a measure to



**Gen Whiting, U.S. Space Command commander, reviewed the Japanese Self-Defense Force ceremonial honor guard, alongside Japan Joint Staff Chairman Gen Yoshida, during an arrival ceremony in front of the Japanese Ministry of Defense. (Photo from Japanese Ministry of Defense, U.S. Space Command, USSPACECOM.)**

combat the economic pressure with diplomatic ties and military partnerships. The United States has made some progress with civilian space cooperation policy in the Indo-Pacific with the Artemis Accords (signed by India, Japan, and the Republic of Korea), but progress with military space cooperation policy has been slow.<sup>5</sup> In July 2023, the United States and Japan hosted the first bilateral Space Engagement Talks between the two countries,<sup>6</sup> and U.S. Space Command also recently announced partnerships with Australia, Italy, and Peru during the Space Symposium in April 2023.<sup>7</sup> However, these agreements have just recently taken place despite the call in the 2020 *DSS* to achieve these objectives “in the next ten years” (2030) and are also limited in scope, missing key partner nations residing inside the first island chain.<sup>8</sup>

A coherent, concentrated policy that would enable military space cooperation with nations in the Indo-Pacific region starting with bi-lateral arrangements and the goal of a multi-lateral coalition would provide the United States with greater leverage through space partnerships and capabilities against the People’s Republic of China and other adversary nations. The Indo-Pacific region is an area of historical disputes and grievances that will make creating

multi-national cooperation that much more difficult, although the threat of the People’s Republic of China has even pushed Japan and the Republic of Korea into trilateral cooperation with the United States indicating opportunity with other nations.<sup>9</sup> The countries that would be the focus of these efforts range from very accomplished, such as India, to the developing, such as Malaysia. Fostering and developing military space cooperation policy will assist the United States in establishing space behavior norms consistent with U.S. policy that can disadvantage adversary nation policies, gaining access to partner nation satellite constellations and launch facilities, create an influx of economic aid to space programs in the region, and provide diplomatic weight to other U.S. policies in the region. For example, Malaysia is currently developing a launch site at Sabah, near the equator, which would enable it to provide launch and satellite capabilities to the Southeast Asia market.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, the Malaysian Space Agency is working with Roscosmos to begin cooperation on “satellite construction, launch services, ground-based space infrastructure, manned space projects, and remote Earth sensing.”<sup>11</sup> Through a policy that promotes military space partnership in addition to civilian space partnership, the United

States would be able to offer alternative support, expertise, and capabilities to the developing Malaysian space program in return for potential access to a near equator launch site, alternative space-based communication architectures, and sharing space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities while denying the same to adversary nations. Another key opportunity for U.S. policy is that Indonesia, a fairly capable space-faring nation, is taking the lead in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) right as discussions of establishing an ASEAN Space Agency have become more public.<sup>12</sup> A step in the right direction would be to update the *DSS* to better portray the environment it hopes to influence and provide more direct guidance on establishing military space cooperation. The 2020 *DSS* makes no mention of competition with adversary nations despite identifying multiple adversary nations or how exactly the DOD and other agencies can forward cooperative policy with international partners.

Since the *DSS* was released in 2020, the two biggest U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific, Japan, and Australia, finally conducted separate military space-focused conferences in 2023 despite being a primary line of effort and preferred diplomatic status. Given the historical preference of allies, establishing the same level of understanding and cooperation with other nations will take much more time as they vary in experience and capability from independent and successful like India, to former adversaries such as Vietnam, and including former colonies whose attitude to great powers changes with each election, the Philippines and India again. Updating the *DSS* with a focus on partnership building in a competition environment with a peer adversary and focused guidance should allow quicker development of military space cooperatives in the Indo-Pacific. The alternative to prioritizing the creation of bi- and multi-lateral military space partnerships would be attempting to create a bi-lateral or multi-lateral agreement under the stress of crisis or conflict. An example of this friction is

shown by the inclusion of Finland and Sweden into NATO due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Turkey's use of delaying those applications to extract concessions in a time of crisis.<sup>13</sup>

To further military space cooperation in support of competition in the Indo-Pacific, the United States needs to establish military liaisons and foreign exchange programs focused on the space domain and military cooperation. Liaison officers and exchange programs are an effective way to establish relationships, share knowledge, and develop tactics and procedures with partner nations. The U.S. military has long since established liaison programs with partner nations and alliances, such as the NATO, to increase the ability to interoperate and share capabilities. Space-based liaison programs with India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, or even ASEAN will provide an operational and tactical-level engagement with the partner nations, particularly in the areas of satellite communications, space situational awareness, and position, navigation, and timing. Liaison programs also enable a low-level transmission of military culture and ideas through the liaison officers as they live and work with partner nation personnel and vice versa. Referencing Italy gives us an idea of the challenges of establishing future relationships in the space domain. Where Italy is a valued NATO ally with already established information sharing and liaison programs and announced establishing a liaison officer to U.S. Space Command as recently as April 2023.<sup>14</sup> Should a crisis or conflict occur in the Indo-Pacific having liaison programs already agreed upon, staffed, and operating will increase the interoperability between the United States, the partner nation, and in the event of a multi-lateral agreement, the regional partners working together.

Another key piece of this effort would be the prioritization of including partner nation officers in foreign exchange programs focused on space education. The Naval Postgraduate School (NPS), the key institution for Navy and Marine Corps Master's and Doctoral level space education, had 120

international students during the academic year 2021.<sup>15</sup> The Air Force's Institute of Technology (AFIT) Graduate School of Engineering had nine.<sup>16</sup> Not all of these international officers were in a space degree program. Until the Space Force fully establishes its relationship with Johns Hopkins University for Professional Military Education, NPS, and AFIT will be the primary locations for higher-level space education. Enabling international officers from Indo-Pacific partner nations to attend NPS, AFIT, and eventually Johns Hopkins would increase the professional transmission of ideas and education. International officers selected to attend U.S. professional military education programs tend to be high performers that eventually rise to high levels of command in their forces, such as the Army War College alumni LtGen Romeo Brawner Jr. the current Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.<sup>17</sup>

In the short term, increasing international officer seats at NPS, AFIT, and eventually, the Space Force and Johns Hopkins education partnership will provide a transmission of education, information, and exposure to other officers from Indo-Pacific countries and provide a desirable billet for international officers aspiring for higher positions. In the long term, these exchange

programs can help the United States develop long-term relationships with partner-nation militaries and influence space doctrine through alumni reaching higher ranks in developing space forces after receiving education in the United States.

A major point of friction, both internal to the U.S. military and external with allies and partner nations, is the levels of classification concerning space capabilities, techniques, and resulting products from space-based capabilities. This is a known problem that restricts the ability of the United States to cooperate and communicate with allies and partner nations. "Allies do not communicate enough about capabilities and gaps to ensure they are not duplicating efforts or leaving gaps that a nation might have the resources to fill—something that Gardiner said could amount to 'fratricide.' One of the major reasons that communication doesn't take place is over-classification, leaders said."<sup>18</sup> The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted this friction point with partner nations. To assist the Ukrainian Armed Forces with the intelligence required, a process to selectively declassify information to share with a nation not in alliance with the United States was needed. This required the intelligence community to devel-



**Marines earning space-related qualifications would enable the Marine Corps to participate in military space cooperation efforts. (Photo by Cpl Brandon Marrero.)**



op a declassification and transmission system capable of sharing actionable intelligence from space-based systems to provide “real-time battlefield intelligence to Ukraine.”<sup>19</sup> To best assist allies and partner nations, a review of the classification of space-based systems, capabilities, and products would greatly facilitate any bilateral or multi-lateral military space partnerships, liaison programs, and military exchange programs. Having this classification review now will enable the United States to further the cooperative discussion with Australia and Japan, valued allies, and establish a discussion on military space capabilities, support, products, and cooperation with partner and potential partner nations, such as Australia, Japan, India, Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Being able to reduce the classification of capabilities and products will provide major support to negotiating bilateral and multi-lateral military space cooperation agreements in that the United States and partner nations will be able to discuss what capabilities are needed, can be provided, if more detailed partnership is desired (on projects with similar objectives) or where gaps in space-based capabilities may be. If the United States cannot more fully discuss the space domain, it cannot easily create partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

To maximize our Allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to compete against adversary nations, the United States needs to promote a military cooperation policy that focuses on establishing bilateral and multi-lateral military space partnerships, establishing military liaison officer and foreign exchange programs, and reducing classifications of space capabilities necessary for cooperation. For the United States to excel in competition and deter or defeat adversary nations, like the People’s Republic of China, in crisis and conflict will require a coalition of nations in the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility. This will require coalition building with nations that have not had a long history of cooperation, such as NATO. Nations such as Australia, Japan, India, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Palau have varying objectives and

historical grievances that will require detailed and extensive negotiations to obtain sufficient levels of cooperation, either bilaterally or multi-laterally. Military space cooperation can help the United States establish a more secure and stable space security environment during competition and a more resilient and responsive military space architecture during conflict in coalition with allies and partners. However, it must be established as soon as possible to enable the United States to compete with its adversaries, assist allies and partners, and deter and defeat hostile powers in conflict.

### Notes

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