

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-105900](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD space systems provide critical capabilities that support military and national security operations. Such systems are expensive to acquire and field, costing billions of dollars each year. The recently established U.S. Space Force will consolidate leadership, planning, and management for selected DOD space programs, as appropriate and authorized.

This statement (1) provides a description of key space system development efforts and summarizes the results of GAO's recent related reports, and (2) addresses challenges and opportunities facing acquisitions of new space systems. This statement is based on GAO reports issued since 2020 on DOD space programs. It also draws on work supporting GAO's annual reports on major defense acquisition programs and other reports on acquisition reforms.

What GAO Recommends

Since 2020, GAO has made eight recommendations across five reports aimed at improving DOD's acquisition of space systems. DOD has partially or fully agreed to all of them. While DOD has plans to implement several of these recommendations, it has not yet fully implemented them. For example, DOD plans to implement recommendations to explore and implement an option to provide near-term narrowband satellite communications capabilities, reexamine future narrowband satellite needs, and make improvements to annual reports on the Space Command and Control program. These plans, if effectively implemented, would meet the intent of GAO's related recommendations.

View [GAO-22-105900](#). For more information, contact Jon Ludwigson at (202) 512-4841 or ludwigsonj@gao.gov.

April 6, 2022

SPACE ACQUISITIONS

Changing Environment Presents Continuing Challenges and Opportunities for DOD

What GAO Found

Space-based capabilities—such as GPS—are fundamental to U.S. defense, national security, and civilian activities. GAO has reported that the Department of Defense (DOD) has faced long-standing challenges in acquiring the space systems that support these capabilities. This has led to significant cost increases and delays. In part to speed the acquisition process, DOD added more flexible acquisition pathways, including one known as the middle tier of acquisition. However, this pathway has trade-offs in reporting, monitoring, and oversight. For example, GAO found in 2021 that DOD had not developed an overarching data collection and reporting strategy for its middle tier of acquisition pathway, limiting DOD's visibility into programs and hindering the quality of its congressional reporting. DOD has undertaken several initiatives to update its processes and systems for reporting acquisition data to Congress and other stakeholders.

GAO has issued reports and made several recommendations on programs managed under this pathway, including the Next Generation Overhead Persistent Infrared satellite system. In September 2021, GAO reported that the program had taken steps aimed at accelerating development, but identified challenges for this system that made its aggressive schedule difficult to achieve. GAO also found that the program had not acknowledged these risks to the schedule in its reports to Congress. Accordingly, GAO recommended that DOD enhance schedule and cost transparency to facilitate congressional decision making.

The new acquisition process, the stand-up of the Space Force, the growth of the commercial space industry, and evolving threats in the space domain present challenges and opportunities for space acquisition efforts.

- DOD has reported making progress establishing the Space Force, but it remains to be seen if this organizational change can address GAO's 2016 concern that space acquisition leadership was fragmented.
- As DOD has reported, a new ecosystem of private companies offering capabilities such as space launch and satellite monitoring could create challenges in monitoring space objects, among other things, but could allow DOD to contract for data or services to meet some of its needs.
- For decades, space was largely a low-threat environment, but DOD has acknowledged that today, potential adversaries continue to develop offensive space capabilities, including weapons intended to target U.S. and allied capabilities.

GAO has reviews in progress that will cover several of the key topics noted above, such as DOD's efforts to tailor the acquisition process, leverage commercial capabilities, and address new threats.