

DOD Has Opportunities to Improve Its Use of Commercial Data and Related Services

GAO-26-107959

August 2026

A report to congressional committees

Contact: Jon Ludwigson at ludwigsonj@gao.gov

What GAO Found

The U.S. commercial space sector has grown rapidly over the last few years, and offers data and data-related services—such as the imagery below—that the Department of Defense (DOD) uses to maintain national security.

National Reconnaissance Office Purchased Commercial Images of Chinese Aircraft Carriers



Source: ©2024 BlackSky Global LLC. | GAO-26-107959

Within the Space Force, the Joint Commercial Operations Cell (JCO)—the main organization that buys data and services—purchased various types of data and services through the contractor-operated Global Data Marketplace. JCO expended \$76.8 million on data and services from the marketplace from January 2023 through September 2025. These purchases supported missions including space domain awareness and tactical surveillance, reconnaissance and tracking. The National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) also purchased various forms of commercial imagery and commercial analytic products, respectively, from fiscal years 2021 through 2025.

Some Space Force officials told GAO about challenges they have faced related to purchasing and using commercial space data such as licensing costs, perceived use restrictions, and concerns over long-term access to the data. These challenges led to hesitation to purchase and use commercial data among these potential users. JCO leads an informal working group to discuss and coordinate current and future commercial space data purchases made by various federal organizations. This working group meets monthly and coordinates purchases. GAO found that many of the challenges reported by Space Force officials could have been addressed with discussions at the working group, but the Space Force officials were not part of the working group and information about the working group is not widely available.

JCO officials said they would be supportive of information about the working group being listed to increase awareness. Increased communication about the working group could lead to additional Space Force and other officials engaging in discussions that could address perceived issues and improve the use of commercial space data and services for national security purposes.

Why GAO Did This Study

Threats to DOD's space assets from strategic competitors have grown substantially in number and intensity. DOD is working to integrate commercial space solutions, such as data and services, to mitigate these threats as well as enhance its capabilities.

Members of Congress included a provision in a committee report for GAO to review DOD's purchases of commercial space data and services. GAO's report examines (1) the types of commercial space data and data-related services DOD purchased from fiscal years 2021 through 2025, and (2) the extent to which DOD faced challenges when purchasing and using these data and related services.

GAO analyzed expenditures for orders JCO made through the Global Data Marketplace from January 27, 2023, to September 30, 2025. In the case of NRO and NGA, GAO obtained unclassified summary information. GAO attended an informal working group meeting led by JCO, reviewed the contract for the marketplace, and interviewed relevant DOD agency officials and contractor representatives. "Commercial space data" are data collected from commercial assets, and "commercial space data-related services" is the range of services for commercial space data.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of the Air Force enhance awareness of and engagement with the working group to address issues and concerns raised by current and potential users of commercial space data and services. DOD agreed with GAO's recommendation and has plans to increase awareness of the working group and of how to access data and services that government entities have purchased.