

Toward a Space Corps?

When the House Armed Services Committee goes through its annual rite of approving the defense authorization bill, the work the panel's seven subcommittees do is quick and largely free of major news as they kick the big decisions to the marathon, day-long debate of the must-pass policy measure.

This year, however, the strategic forces subcommittee decided to shake things up. Their portion of the bill doesn't just prescribe funding levels and set new policy, it will create a whole new military service, a fighting force focused on warfare in space.

The so-called Space Corps would function quite a bit like the Marine Corps. The nascent service, if it makes it into the final defense bill, would be a part of the Department of the Air Force, but its four-star chief would be a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Service leaders have been united in their opposition to Space Corps.

The leaders of the subcommittee—Republican Mike Rogers of Alabama and Democrat Jim Cooper of Tennessee—were united in the proposal, saying it is a bipartisan acknowledgement that the US strategic advantage in space is eroding. The problems, they said, are not only developments by adversaries, but “crippling organizational and management structure and an acquisition system that has led to delays and cost overruns.”

The only solution, they contend, is a separate military service responsible for National Security Space programs for which the Air Force has responsibility today.

Their proposal generated only mild criticism during the panel's markup of the authorization measure, and the committee easily fended off an effort from Ohio Republican Michael Turner, who chairs the tactical air and land forces subcommittee, to water down the language.

Indeed, Space Corps has the backing of the Republican and Democrat leaders of the powerful Armed Services panel. During the debate on the bill, Chairman Mac Thornberry of Texas acknowledged the historic nature of the proposal, but also stressed that the subcommittee had thoroughly worked on the issue.

“It was Congress that created the Air Force in 1947, when it became time; it was Congress that created the Department of Defense and forced the Army and the Navy together; it was Congress that did Goldwater-Nichols,” Thornberry said. “There are times when an issue becomes developed and ripe and it is our responsibility to act.”

Air Force Secretary Heather A. Wilson has stressed the need to focus time, energy, and investments on space. She and other service leaders have been united in their opposition to Space Corps, which they claim creates unnecessary new bureaucracy and could ultimately hurt the United States' ability to respond to threats in space.

The Air Force has proposed a 20 percent increase in space funding in the Fiscal 2018 budget, noted Wilson, while also announcing a reorganization aimed at improving the Air Force's ability to make advances and counter threats in space.

Rogers said he is disappointed by the Air Force's claims that Space Corps won't help meet the objectives of advancing in space.

“Let me be clear, that is not the case,” he told the panel during its 14-hour debate on the bill. “Our plan empowers the Secretary of the Air Force with the ability to shape the composition of the Space Corps, streamline the acquisition authorities, and prioritize space as the important warfighting domain that it is.”

While Space Corps has the near-unanimous support of the House Armed Services Committee, the Senate's version of the measure does not contain anything similar. And it seems unlikely that the Senate Armed Services Committee, which is typically more circumspect about making sweeping changes to military organization, would go along with the language this year.

It's also likely that it will continue to face strong pushback from the Pentagon, which has been loath to add to the elite and exclusive Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Indeed, it took the National Guard, which has tremendous sway on Capitol Hill, years to elevate its chief to a four-star and give him a seat with the other Joint Chiefs, thanks largely to strong and mostly united opposition from other military brass. The Marine Corps faced similar hurdles decades ago.

If history is any guide, it seems unlikely that Space Corps will happen in the coming months, as the two chambers work out their differences on the massive policy bill. But the fact that it has the endorsement of House Armed Services leaders also means it's a proposal with some legs and could one day become law.

Megan Scully is a reporter for *CQ Roll Call*.



Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson speaks about the proposed deputy chief of staff for space and her role as the Secretary of Defense's principal advisor on space.

Photo: Wayne A. Clark/USAF