

FTCN Replay: US Space Operations Enter a New Era

The [US Space Force](#) faces unprecedented challenges as it works to maintain space superiority in an increasingly complex and contested domain. In a recent episode of [From the Crows' Nest](#) podcast, host and AOC Director of Advocacy & Outreach [Ken Miller](#) had a conversation with [Brian Weeden](#), Systems Director at the Aerospace Corporation's Center for Space Policy and Strategy, about key developments and ongoing challenges shaping American space strategy and operations in 2025.

Commercial Space Growth Drives Strategic Shifts

The commercial space sector's explosive growth has fundamentally altered the operational landscape for military space activities. Weeden highlighted the dramatic transformation, noting that satellite populations have surged "from something on the order of 1,500 active satellites in orbit back when I was tracking that stuff 15 years ago to now more than 10,000."

This growth has prompted the Space Force to develop new strategies for leveraging commercial capabilities. Last year's commercial space strategy represents a significant policy shift, as Weeden explained: "There's a recognition that the innovation happening in US private sector is one of the huge strengths that America has in the growing competition with potential adversaries and other countries around the world."

However, integrating commercial and military space operations presents challenges. The Space Force must balance security requirements with the need to access commercial innovation. "They're trying to figure out which missions, which activities can be kind of turned over or largely done via commercial methods versus which activities we call inherently

governmental that still need to be owned and operated by the US government,” Weeden observed.

Two major obstacles complicate this integration: new companies’ unfamiliarity with government processes and longstanding classification barriers. “A lot of these companies, they’re new, they’re startups, they haven’t really interacted with the government before,” Weeden noted. Additionally, “there’s been a series of leaders of the Space Force and the DOD who have been talking the last several years about the need to declassify or reduce the classification of some of these areas just so they can then reach out to industry better.”

Lessons from Ukraine Reshape Space Warfare Thinking

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has provided crucial insights into modern space warfare, with Ukraine demonstrating superior integration of space capabilities despite Russia’s traditional space power advantages. “Ukraine has done a much better job than Russia in integrating their ability to use space in their war fighting operations. Down to the tactical level that was very surprising to many people,” Weeden explained.

Ukraine’s success stems from several factors, including their lack of legacy systems and military empowerment to innovate. Most significantly, Ukraine has leveraged commercially available space capabilities rather than relying on government-owned systems. “Ukraine is primarily using commercial capabilities for space. They’re not relying on government owned and operated things they built themselves,” Weeden said.

This conflict has demonstrated what Weeden considers “maybe the first space war in terms of both sides having both space and counter-space capabilities.” The experience has highlighted how commercial space assets, particularly systems

like Starlink, have become integral to military operations and potential targets in conflicts.

International Partnerships Mark Dramatic Policy Evolution

The US Space Force has undergone a radical transformation in its approach to international cooperation. Weeden contrasted current policies with past practices, recalling that “when I was in Air Force base command roughly 20 years ago doing some of these jobs, it was all entirely US only.”

The recent International Partnership Strategy released in June 2025 represents a fundamental shift. “In the context of the way we did things in the past, it is a fairly radical document because it says the goal is to fully integrate allies and partners into not only military space operations, but also the acquisitions, procurement, and the force development process,” Weeden explained.

This integration begins with Five Eyes partners but extends to additional allies including Germany, Japan, and Norway. The strategy aims to create unprecedented cooperation in space warfighting capabilities and force development, though implementation requires significant coordination. “All these other allies and partners have to figure out on their end, how are they organizing their own space forces, how are they doing their own policies, what are their goals, so that then we can actually get together and sync up,” Weeden said.

Budget Growth Reflects Strategic Priorities

The Space Force has received substantial budget increases, including significant additions through recent reconciliation legislation. Beyond the requested \$26.3 billion for fiscal year 2026, reconciliation added \$21.6 billion for space-focused projects across multiple years.

Major investments target new capabilities like the Moving

Target Indicator program, which represents a shift from traditional airborne surveillance to space-based systems. "The DOD has made a decision to not procure aircraft to do that in the future because they don't think that they can survive in a future contested air domain. So instead, they want to do that mission from space," Weeden explained.

Despite these investments, fundamental challenges remain in spectrum management, space domain awareness, and the complex command relationships between the Space Force and Space Command. As Weeden concluded, these issues reflect the broader challenge of adapting military organizations to a domain where "it's mostly technology. It's machines" rather than traditional human-centered operations.

The Space Force's evolution continues as it navigates the intersection of commercial innovation, international cooperation, and emerging threats in an increasingly contested space environment.