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Strategic Forces Subcommittee Hearing Focuses on Protecting Space and U.S. National Power

Washington, D.C. — Witnesses testifying before the Strategic Forces Subcommittee of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee today stressed not only the omnipresence of space capabilities in numerous spheres of American life—including military operations—but also the need to protect these assets.

In a hearing aimed at examining how space capabilities affect everyday life and the implications of space's growing importance—as well as the consequences of its disruption or loss—to national security and economic interests, Subcommittee Chairman Terry Everett (R-AL) said in his opening comments that “this foundation of knowledge is important to start a long-term dialogue on how we protect our interests in space, and continue discussions on our space investment strategy and how we sustain U.S. leadership in space.”

Ranking Member Silvestre Reyes (D-TX) echoed these remarks, and added that “our ability to continue benefiting from space assets is not assured.... We need to understand the shape of this terrain, potential threats to our space assets, and actions that we have taken or could take to counter these threats before a crisis.”

In his opening statement Lieutenant General C. Robert Kehler, Deputy Commander, United States Strategic Command, emphasized U.S. reliance on its space assets. “Space capabilities,” he said, “are inextricably woven into the fabric of American security, scientific, and economic activities.... Space capabilities have revolutionized the way we fight today by providing our forces with battlefield situational awareness, environmental understanding, precise weapons effects, and the ability to control and synchronize military operations on a global scale.”

In further explaining the role space assets play on the modern battlefield, Kehler said that “our space capabilities enable the American way of war.” He added that if there were a significant degradation of a capability such as the Global Positioning System (GPS), the U.S.'s battlefield strike capability would be weakened. Such a capability was demonstrated recently when Air Force F-16 aircraft dropped precision-guided bombs on the hideout of Al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Edward Morris, Director of the U.S. Commerce Department's Office of Space Commercialization, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, echoed the importance of space assets, especially in the commercial arena: “We would not have CNN, DirecTV™, XM Radio™, OnStar™, or Google Earth™ if it were not for U.S. space-based assets,” Morris said. “Our cell phone

networks and ATMs would work less efficiently if they were not synchronized to the Universal Standard Time (UTC) that is distributed by GPS. Our daily weather forecasts would be far less reliable without earth observing satellites.”

David Cavossa, Executive Director of the Satellite Industry Association, emphasized the value of satellites in particular, noting that they “contribute over \$90 billion to the global economy.”

Subcommittee Chairman Everett pointed to one of the hearing’s central concerns when he asked witnesses about the consequences of the loss of space assets. Dr. Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution said that the loss of a significant number of space assets would have various consequences, depending on the type of capability involved. “There are some aspects,” he said, “in which the loss of space assets would be catastrophic.”

Responding to Representative Joe Schwarz’s (R-MI) question about today’s most taxing threats to U.S. space systems, Kehler cited the issues of GPS and communications satellite jamming and providing physical security—not only for satellites themselves, but also for ground stations and the elements of the command and control operation that enable space operations. He added that the Defense Department is trying to look across the board and understand where vulnerabilities exist. Kehler said that, in some cases, U.S. capabilities are very well protected and, in some cases, less well protected.

Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA) expressed concern about what the U.S. is doing about all the other players in space, prompting Kehler to observe that the U.S. is taking steps to improve its space situational awareness capabilities. Regarding Larsen’s question about the implications of China’s programs in particular, O’Hanlon said that it would take “decades” for China to achieve real-time data networks. He added that the U.S. must operate under the assumption that, at some future date, it would have to think about ways to prevent the threat to U.S. ships from a Chinese space sensor-shooter link. O’Hanlon stressed that the U.S. is at a unique point in time with respect to its predominance in space, but said “it will not last,” adding that the U.S. must assume that space assets will be compromised in the future.

In his opening statement, Kehler mentioned examples of disruptions of U.S. satellites that also impacted the commercial world. “While none of these incidents proved catastrophic,” he said, “our enemies clearly understand the reliance we place in our space capabilities and we should expect the level and sophistication of efforts to deny us the advantages of space to increase in future conflicts. We can not assume space will be a sanctuary for U.S. national security assets and must take prudent steps to ensure that we have the capability to protect our space assets and to guarantee our freedom of action in space.”

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