COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Frank Lucas

Space & Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing

Space Situational Awareness: Key Issues in an Evolving Landscape

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Thank you, Chairwoman Horn, for holding this timely hearing on situational awareness in space. Only two weeks ago we saw the importance of this issue, as two defunct government satellites, each traveling at roughly 17,500 miles per hour, came dangerously close to each other 560 miles above Pittsburgh. While there was no threat to those on the ground, a collision in space could be significant because the debris could impact other satellites or even potentially threaten astronauts aboard the International Space Station depending on the orbit.

The satellites ultimately passed each other without incident, but there were widely varied estimates of their chances of colliding – ranging from 1 in 100 to 1 in 1000. Limitations on tracking data and the satellites' exact characteristics and orientation lead to this kind of uncertainty, which is problematic. For instance, most of the data on objects in space comes from the Department of Defense (DoD). While the DoD provides data to the international community and the private sector, national security concerns limit the fidelity of the data it can release.

The private sector, however, is emerging as an important partner in this equation. Companies are beginning to provide not only visualization products and services, but also sensor data. Furthermore, companies that operate satellites typically have better data on their satellites than anyone else. Non-profit groups like the Space Data Association and the newly formed Space Safety Coalition are partnering with government agencies, commercial satellite operators, space data providers, and the international community to provide solutions to the challenge of space situational awareness, space debris mitigation, and space traffic management.

The Trump Administration is also paying attention. Vice President Pence and the National Space Council released two important policies related to the topic before us today. Space Policy Directive 2 calls for streamlining space regulations and Space Policy Directive 3 calls for a coordinated space traffic management effort to ensure safety, stability, and innovation in space.

The principles in these policies track directly with the positions this Committee has advocated for in numerous hearings over the last decade. Furthermore, this Committee passed two critical pieces of legislation out of the House in the previous Congress that relate to space situational awareness and space traffic management. The American Space Commerce Free Enterprise Act, sponsored

by Ranking Member Babin, and the American Space SAFE Management Act, would go a long way to advancing the development of standards, best practices, and rules of the road in a way that would not stifle the private sector.

The Administration also proposed giving the Department of Commerce, rather than the Department of Defense, the responsibility to issue notices of potential collisions. DoD would prefer to focus its efforts on supporting our troops and national security. The Department of Commerce already has experience dealing with the private sector to assist commerce. They also license commercial remote sensing satellite operators; operate a fleet of government weather satellites; protect critical technologies from export; provide safety notifications and forecasting for weather; and understand how to manage technology in a manner that fosters innovation.

The Office of Space Commerce at the Department of Commerce is already up and running and has served a similar function coordinating interactions with the U.S. government, international partners, and the private sector related to Global Positioning System policies as the host of the Position, Navigation, and Timing National Coordination Office.

Unfortunately, Democratic Senate Appropriators are preventing the Department of Commerce from reorganizing in a way that can advance space safety. If we want to seriously address the problem of tracking space debris, advance our space object tracking capabilities, and develop best practices and rules of the road for operating in space, the first step is allowing the Office of Space Commerce to be the “commercial storefront” for space situational awareness data. The government can then partner with the private sector and international community to share data and establish consensus-based norms of behavior. This will go a long way to ensuring Earth orbit remains useful for future generations.

I look forward to working with my colleagues here on the Committee, as well as Appropriators, the Administration, and the private sector to advance common-sense policy solutions related to space object tracking.

Thank you and I yield back the balance of my time.

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