

Dickinson Details Tenets of Responsible Space Behavior in Domain That Shares Similarities to the Sea



Gen. James Dickinson compares harsh domains of the sea and space in his keynote address on Aug. 3. *NAVY LEAGUE / Lisa Nipp*

Space and the sea perhaps would seem at first blush to be very different and disparate operating environments. Army Gen. James H. Dickinson, the man in charge of U.S. Space Command, believes otherwise.

At a luncheon and then a media roundtable at the Navy League's Sea-Air-Space expo at National Harbor, Maryland, on Aug. 3, Dickinson pointed out that both environments are the harshest in which to operate. Further, both the sea and space are becoming increasingly more contested by potential adversaries.

"We each share a vast area. In the maritime domain, it's 10,000 miles across the Pacific Ocean," Dickinson said. "For us, it's out to the moon and beyond. Both are concerned with respective domains that are very vast, and very difficult, complex and unforgiving."

As the head of the nation's newest unified combatant command, Dickinson's job is to use the trained men and women sent to him by the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and newly created Space Force for operational reasons in the space domain.

"They all bring their own capabilities to the command, which we use for daily operations," Dickinson said.

Success hinges upon an understanding of the specific challenges space poses, Dickinson said. Space debris, whether old junk or the remnants of a Chinese satellite they deliberately destroyed a little more than a decade ago, is a prime example.

“There are still remnants of that in lower orbit, and we’ll have that effect for years to come,” Dickinson said. “What’s important about the low Earth orbit is that’s where we do things with human spaceflight. The International Space Station is in low Earth orbit. When you talk about risk to human life, you have it when you have that type of activity going on.”

Space Force Guardians under Dickinson’s command at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California, have a primary mission of tracking and mitigating such debris. The command then provides relevant information to governmental agencies and public entities that share an interest in knowing about what threats their space assets are facing. Dickinson compares the mission to that of the Federal Aviation Administration, which tracks and manages the safety of thousands of flights each day.

“It’s an exciting time to be in the space enterprise. There’s no lack of energy,” Dickinson said. “People want to come work for us.”

In the immediate future, Dickinson will tackle the job Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III bestowed upon him with the July issuance of five tenets of responsible space behavior, which would apply to operations, fielding acquisition and every other related aspect: One, operate in, from, to and through space with due regard to others and in a professional manner; two, limit the generation of long-lived space debris; three, avoid the creation of harmful interference; four, maintain safe separation and safe trajectory; and, five, communicate and make notifications to enhance the safety and stability of the domain.

Noting that the directive is part of a government-wide effort to address conduct in space both in the U.S. and among partner nations, Dickinson expressed hope that an international agreement to support it.

“In the meantime, just think about how much we can learn from our Navy teammates in this regard – how we assess behavior and respond when adversaries fall short of the standards,” Dickinson said, “with the power from a position of strength to compel seafaring operations to operate within those rules.”