

# **The Challenges of Capturing American Space Strategy: Summary**

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The way that I have approached this paper is to engage in a sort of thought experiment: what would I, as a “consumer” of space archives, like to be able to find within them in the coming decades? My introduction to space archives was somewhat accidental. At the beginning of my doctoral studies, I set out with a fairly typical sort of International Relations research question concerned with contemporary policy and was therefore not anticipating a need to consult archives. However, my project on US-China interaction in space quickly gave rise to questions about the past. I was pleased to be able to address many of these questions by making use of NARA records and the National Security Archive at GWU. I am concerned that future scholars will not be able to study the politics of space strategy taking place today in quite the same way, however.

In this summary I first outline my understanding of the breadth of “National Security Space Strategy.” Modern security studies scholarship has widened the meaning of the concept of “security,” demanding a much wider collection of materials for future study. Second, I discuss concerns which have arisen in the course of my research on contemporary US space strategy. Third, I introduce some tentative recommendations to help mitigate against future risks.

## **Where can we find national security space strategy?**

The Obama administration produced a document called the *National Security Space Strategy* in 2011, currently available online as an unclassified version on an archived DoD website. If only this document contained what it purports to, then the archiving task would be simple. Instead, any student of space policy or security would tell you that these policy pronouncements are merely a tiny piece of a much larger policymaking process. These processes are conceived as widely as possible in critical security scholarship, meaning that future critical scholars will be among the most

voracious and demanding “customers” for archives in terms of scope. From this viewpoint “National Security Space Strategy” is not found in one document, or a single policy decision, but is rather the totality of statements and practices related to the policymaking process. Additionally, the boundary between security and non-security matters is not self-evident, meaning that scholars will need to cast their nets widely to determine how these boundaries were negotiated. The list below gives some sense of the scope that future security scholars might desire:

**Items currently public:**

- All public policy statements and documents on space from all relevant government organisations, e.g. White House, DoD, State, Congress, NASA, military, intelligence community. Public statements and documents from private companies involved in national security space, e.g. ULA, SpaceX.
- Materials documenting public policy implementation e.g. launches, technology procurement/cancellation, organisational changes.

**Items we can guess exist now but are currently restricted:**

- Restricted government materials from the above. Ideally, this would include internal documents detailing how public positions were reached, what other options were considered, and why – not just documents from senior leadership. This would also include potentially ephemeral digital sources such as intranet materials.
- Confidential documents of private companies involved. Particular interest in internal discussions of how to approach business with the government, technical decisions taken, and internal dissent.
- Sociological/anthropological data from the participants in the various processes (politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, engineers). What were their thoughts at the time? What cultural/political/technical practices did they experience which are absent from the documentary record?

## Concerns and obstacles

The first major obstacle to documenting contemporary national security space strategy is its ever-increasing diffusion. During the Cold War, American national security space policy was primarily concerned with the USSR, with some notable exceptions such as Europe and China. Today, the US, China, and Russia all have large space programs; and India and Europe have substantial programs too. Furthermore, the number of space-faring states has continued to rise, including those with an independent launch capability. The consequence is that American national security space strategy is no longer mostly concerned with one state, but rather deals with a multitude, many of which are thought to pose national security threats in some manner. Additionally, national security space is contracted out to some of the “New Space” companies, and an array of sub-contractors, taking some documentation outside of the traditional scope of NARA. Presumably, interesting politics are taking place within those companies which are relevant to the understanding of national security space strategy. Gaining trust and access to ensure that information could be preserved could be difficult, and failing to preserve these documents could seriously hamstring future research.

The archived websites which hold digital statements and records of the federal departments and agencies are aging, and some of their features are already disabled. The efforts to capture the web presence of the Obama administration was impressive, but was only possible with an *ad hoc* and semi-official collaboration of many organisations. How well this can be repeated remains to be seen, however it would be wise to anticipate that this process will not always be so smooth or successful. Furthermore, the capture of these websites in the past could have been more wide-ranging. The search functions on the Bush-era State Department website, for example, does not function. Although Google can be used to search within the archive document, this changes the means of engagement with the website in a non-trivial way. The original search algorithms are of historical interest themselves because they ordered what users would have experienced during the operational life of the website. Unsurprisingly, this state of affairs has already led to some loss of data. Researchers seeking DoD threat assessments of China’s space program in the

Annual Reports to Congress, for example, will only find a complete collection by visiting Prof. Andrew Erickson's personal website rather than any official source.

A final concern is that of over-classification and the potential for re-classification in space policy. The most pressing issue here is that it is very difficult to know what is out there now, and so impossible to know for sure what might need to be preserved or what is currently at risk. The National Academy of Science flagged this problem in their 2016 report on National Security Space, but in regard to policy debate and interagency synergy, rather than with a view to preserving historical records. Under these circumstances, it would be very easy for whole swathes of documents to disappear from the historical record without even an indication to future researchers that there is a gap. Moreover, attempts by the government in the past to retroactively re-classify documents set a worrying precedent in the mid-2000s. We cannot rely on unrestricted access to the national security space-related documents, adding further risks and complications to future archiving efforts.

## **Recommendations**

- Partner with the National Security Archive at the George Washington University to thicken their coverage of national security space. They have excellent legal and organisational experience in dealing with FOIA and classification. Furthermore, they provide access to documents which is institutionally separate from NARA, spreading risk in case of re-classification. The Archive could also be a helpful ally for combating overclassification.
- Continue to back-up Federal government archived websites (e.g. State, DoD) to insulate their existence from budgetary politics, but also to allow for website maintenance (comparison of previous versions, restoring search functions, allowing analysis of code, providing a sitemap etc.). Liaising and cooperating with the Internet Archive would be one option.
- Reaching out to contractors and sub-contractors to learn about their own internal archiving practices. The aim would be to engage in a dialogue to ensure the firms understood the importance of preserving space history.

- Establish (or maintain?) a dialogue with chief historians of organisations like the NRO and Air Force Space Command (AFSpC) to gain a sense of what might be being preserved now, but perhaps more importantly also to attempt to influence what future internal policies on archiving classified materials will be in the future.
- Establish a professional membership organisation to pool non-documentary sources such as interviews and ethnographic data. Small funding grants for filling gaps in the archive (identified by members of the community) could be used to encourage and direct further research.