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U.S. Must Get More Complete Space Tracking: Payton

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OMAHA, Neb. - Space situational awareness (SSA) has a long way to go toward making space safe, the Pentagon's top space-asset authority said Oct. 8 at the Space Foundation's Strategic Space and Defense conference.

Cataloging what the U.S. and other countries launch is not SSA, Gary Payton said.

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"Life-long track custody is a condition we need to get to for SSA. We are a long way from that," he said. "We have to migrate from the world of cataloging to the way the [Federal Aviation Administration] and the Air Force do air traffic control."

Some of the tools necessary for a more complete space-tracking capability are available now, Payton said.

"We have plenty of sensors doing SSA," he said. "No rocket takes off anywhere in the world without the U.S. knowing about it - Colorado first, Omaha very soon after - and if that rocket is going the wrong way... the White House gets a call."

But the Pentagon could do a better job fusing that data after it is gathered, comparing notes with allies, NASA and the intelligence community.

Other tools are on the way, he said, citing the Space-Based Space Surveillance (SBSS) satellite being built by Boeing and Ball Aerospace - expected to launch in the spring - and the developmental Rapid Attack Identification Detection Reporting System, known as RAIDRS, which has already revealed that most jamming is actually unintentional radio frequency interference from our own satellites, Payton said.

Only after such technologies are better developed - and they must be developed quickly - can U.S. policy evolve from a routine space catalog program with passive protection measures to a dynamic space protection architecture, he said.

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