



## **Opening Statement of Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Chairman Brian Babin**

Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing  
*ISS and Beyond: The Present and Future of American Low-Earth Orbit Activities*

February 14, 2024

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Today's subcommittee hearing will address the ongoing activities of the United States in Low Earth Orbit, and as well as the path to a future Low Earth Orbit that is occupied by a range of government, private, and international actors.

Last month, this subcommittee considered the role of NASA's Artemis program in establishing America as a leader in human space exploration on the Moon. Our hearing today will focus on human space exploration activities that are a bit closer to home, but no less important.

Over 20 years ago, the United States established a continuous human presence in space through the International Space Station, which we all know as the ISS. Weighing over 900,000 pounds and spanning the distance of a football field, the International Space Station is the largest single human-built structure in space.

This one-of-a-kind research platform orbits 250 miles above Earth at 17,500 miles per hour, and offers researchers several unique scientific opportunities, including access to a consistent microgravity environment and the extreme conditions of outer space.

Not only is the ISS a technological wonder, but it also represents impressive achievements in international cooperation and foreign policy. The ISS partnership involves five space agencies from 15 countries, and researchers from over 100 countries have conducted science tied to the ISS.

Congress has extended the lifespan of the ISS program multiple times, most recently directing NASA to continue operations until 2030. While ISS continues to yield several impressive scientific discoveries, the station shows signs of aging.

NASA has solicited industry input for a U.S. Deorbit Vehicle capable of safely deorbiting the station by burning it up on reentry. I hope to learn more today from NASA about the process they used to determine that this vehicle is the best approach for deorbiting and about how they calculated the proposed cost.

Congress must consider the United States' objectives for Low Earth Orbit (also known as LEO) and plan for a future that does not rely on the ISS. Selecting the correct approach will depend on a range of factors, many of which we will explore in today's hearing.

First, we must assess how LEO activities promote the national interest. What does the United States seek to accomplish in LEO? What are the consequences of a gap in the United States'

LEO presence? How will we maintain the international relationships we have grown through ISS? How are other nations, friendly or otherwise, moving forward with LEO activities?

Then, we must understand NASA's role in these objectives. What research priorities must NASA complete before ISS retirement or transition? How do NASA's LEO activities facilitate other human space exploration activities?

Finally, we must understand the developing commercial marketplace for LEO activities and services. How can commercial providers facilitate NASA goals? Will these commercial capabilities be available before retirement of ISS?

We have asked for answers to these questions in previous legislative efforts and continue to stress the importance of obtaining clarity on these points to inform future LEO activities in a post-ISS world.

We also cannot forget that America already faces international competition in LEO. When ISS was constructed, it was the only facility of its kind. Today, the Chinese Communist Party operates a space station that has hosted Taikonauts in LEO since 2021. The CCP has also solicited international partnerships to conduct research activities on this station. If another station is not operable by the time ISS retires, the Chinese station may be the only human-occupied station available to scientists for LEO research.

The Committee must consider how to address all of these factors as it drafts a NASA Authorization bill. Today's discussion will inform those legislative efforts and allow us to provide NASA with clear direction at this critical moment in space innovation.

Of course, I have a strong interest in this effort. For years, Houston has been a leader in LEO activities. Not only does Houston host the Johnson Space Center, which manages the ISS program, but Houston also is home to an array of space companies with innovative ideas for commercial use of LEO. But this is an issue bigger than just Houston; it impacts scientists, companies, and governments around the world. How we respond to this challenge will have far-reaching effects, so it's important we get this right.

I want to thank our panel of witnesses for sharing their experience and expertise on this matter, and I look forward to our discussion.

I now recognize the Ranking Member for his statement.