



Opening Statement of Chairman Brian Babin

Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing
The Future of Low Earth Orbit: From the ISS to Commercial Platforms
March 25, 2026

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today's hearing on this important topic.

The International Space Station, which most of us know as the ISS, is a remarkable accomplishment that demonstrates the ingenuity of the American space program.

The ISS, managed at NASA's Johnson Space Center in my district, has been a vital part of NASA's human exploration and scientific efforts for more than 25 years.

Since the turn of the century, nearly 200 Americans have visited the ISS. One of the best parts of my job is welcoming astronauts home after their stay aboard the ISS and hearing about the important work they carried out in orbit.

While the ISS stands today as a major NASA success, the path to its development and operation was not always smooth. NASA overcame many obstacles, including design changes, funding challenges, and a nine-year gap in access to U.S. launch and reentry capability.

Despite all of that, construction was completed in 2011, and NASA reports the ISS is in its most productive phase yet. The nation benefits from maximizing the return on this asset. Access to consistent crew and cargo missions is key to fully utilizing the station.

However, NASA has faced self-inflicted challenges in its operation of the ISS. For example, during the Biden Administration, NASA failed to request funding for a vehicle needed to deorbit the ISS through traditional means, such as the President's budget request, and instead pursued funding through a disaster supplemental. When such supplemental funds were not provided, NASA was forced to draw funds from ISS operations to pay for the development of the deorbit vehicle. This resulted in fewer crew and cargo missions, limiting the amount and quality of operations that could be carried out aboard the ISS.

Only when Congress, through the One Big Beautiful Bill, provided \$1.25 billion for space operations, was NASA able to once again achieve a normal level of operations. NASA was also able to resume its work on long-planned experiments, such as the upgrade to the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer.

While it is important to continue productive ISS operations, we also must acknowledge that the station is aging and NASA should carefully plan for the next phase of LEO operations. This Committee has long championed America's commercial space sector, and that will continue to

be the case. I am excited to see what our innovative commercial providers will put in orbit in the coming years and look forward to learning more about their progress during today's hearing.

However, I also want to be certain that we are managing the transition from the ISS to commercial providers in a thoughtful manner. We must have a clear picture of NASA's LEO needs in a post-ISS world. We also must be mindful of the current, constrained fiscal environment and work to ensure that any transition does not strain the budget for NASA's space operations or compromise other Agency priorities.

Moreover, after more than a quarter of a century of uninterrupted American presence in space, it would be unfortunate for the next phase to include any gap in U.S. human presence in low Earth orbit—particularly as China continues to send taikonauts to its Tiangong space station.

I hope to use today's hearing as an opportunity to examine the lessons we learned from NASA's development and operation of the ISS as we move into the next era of an American presence in low Earth orbit. I also hope to better understand what Congress can expect in a future low Earth orbit economy, the role NASA will play, and what this Committee can do to facilitate its growth.

I want to thank our witnesses for taking the time to be here, and I look forward to a productive discussion.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.