Space Research and Continuing Exploration Act
SPONSORS: SEN. CORNYN AND SEN. HICKENLOOPER

Background:

- Currently, China is launching new modules to its Tiangong space station to meet growing demands for science and to boost international cooperation, according to Space News. China is developing a new-generation crew spacecraft with two variants: one for low Earth orbit (LEO) and one, named Mengzhou, for crewed lunar missions.
- China has been actively promoting international cooperation through Tiangong, offering countries like Oman, Egypt, Pakistan, and others opportunities to participate in space research largely for free or at extremely low cost. China has offered to train foreign astronauts, where Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the UAE have shown interest. They have also offered to train engineers, scientists, and mission operators for satellite development and launch services that Egypt, Algeria, and Argentina are actively involved in. This is a part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative, where space cooperation is bundled with tech transfer, loans, development projects, etc.
- This underscores a strategic and accelerating investment by foreign adversaries in space-based infrastructure, research, and exploration. This is about geopolitical influence, strategic positioning, and leadership in the emerging space economy around the world. China's ability to offer space-based partnerships to other nations allows it to build soft power and potentially shift international norms in space governance and tech standards.
- This bill will support public-private partnerships and economic development by bridging government and commercial sector interests. The Institute will enhance U.S. competitiveness in the emerging trillion-dollar space economy, support small businesses, lower barriers to entry in space R&D, and collaborate across the government.

Importance:

- The International Space Station (ISS) National Lab was created to facilitate access to microgravity research on the ISS for commercial, academic, and government users. When the ISS is retired in 2030, microgravity research will be conducted on commercial platforms. It is imperative that an entity similar to the ISS National Lab exists to ensure access to a microgravity research platform for commercial space stations and facilitate US Government innovation and national security.

Bill Overview:

- The Space RACE Act proposes the creation of a National Institute for Space Research – a federally controlled but independently operated entity designed to coordinate and advance US microgravity research in LEO using next-generation space platforms after the retirement of the ISS.
- This institute will serve as the cornerstone for sustaining US leadership and innovation in space. It will be supervised by a Board of Directors composed of scientists and employees from relevant government agencies. The Board will develop budget requests, policies, and standard operating procedures, supervise operations, set research priorities, and submit appropriate grant or cooperative agreement budget requests to Congress.