Air Force launches unmanned orbital test vehicle

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Last night, at 7:52 PM, the Air Force launched [1] its X-37B Orbital Test Vehicle (OTV) on a classified mission that could last up to nine months. The unmanned orbiter is designed to be reusable, though exact details remain classified.

Launched atop an Atlas V rocket, the X-37B resembles a mini Space Shuttle. The OTV is roughly 1/4 the size and features a wingspan 1/5 that of a Shuttle (29 and 15 feet vs. 122 and 78 feet). Unlike the Shuttle, the X-37B will spend long periods in space (up to nine months), then land autonomously.

Boeing designed the OTV and is quite pleased [2] with its inception. “The X-37B has the potential to bring to space the flexibility that unmanned systems provide warfighters and combatant commanders today,” said Dennis Muilenburg, president and CEO of Boeing Defense, Space & Security.

Once in orbit, the OTV’s payload doors open much like the Shuttle’s, exposing its cargo. Mission details and exact capabilities are classified, but one could foresee a multitude of applications: intel-gathering, scientific experiments, satellite retrofit and retrieval, and a test bed for future technologies.

According to Air Force deputy undersecretary for space programs, Gary Payton, a top priority is cutting the turn-around time between flights. The goal is a couple weeks. By contrast, the Space Shuttle takes three to four months.

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