Space Militarism or Cooperation: Two Sides of the Same Coin

By Lewis Groswald, Eurasia Center **February, 2007**

On January 11, 2007, China demonstrated that it has the capability to shoot down a satellite in orbit from a ground-based missile. The United States and several of its allies, including Canada and Australia lodged formal protests. China has set a potentially dangerous precedent for the future of cooperative manned efforts in space. Suddenly, those who lived to watch *Sputnik* cross over their heads can't help but think of what a move on China's part means. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the U.S. has had the capability to shoot down satellites in orbit since 1985, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. A U.S. Defense Department plan to use a Navy missile to shatter a its dysfunctional spy satellite will give the U.S. important data that could boost the U.S. the ability to destroy foreign space assets.

For the most part, use of near-Earth orbit has been done peacefully, and this was further fostered by the Outer Space Treaty, which was in part a reaction to proposals that would foster a military presence in space. Cooperation in space also became more appealing than the weaponization of space due to the end of the Cold War, and Russia's ailing and under-funded space program that needed resources only cooperating with other space agencies could provide. Today the legacy of cooperation lives on as NASA, along with the European, Russian, Canadian, Japanese and Brazilian Space Agencies are joined

together in the greatest space project ever: the International Space Station. An even grander engineering feat than the Apollo program, the ISS brings all of the parties involved together in a project that cannot be done by any one agency alone. Furthermore, although the U.S. built its *Skylab* space station, it pales in comparison to Russia's *Mir* space station, which was larger and in space longer than the *Skylab*. This is one reason why Russian expertise on the ISS project is essential both to the overall success of completion of the station as well as an important factor in keeping costs down.

However, a recent cooling of U.S-Russia relationships have brought worry to some that come 2010 when the Space Shuttle fleet is forced into retirement, the U.S. will be completely reliant upon Russia for all manned spaceflight and ISS resupplying missions. The U.S. and Russia have had a long history of cooperation, dating back to the first rendezvous of an Apollo and a Soyuz (Союз) capsules in July 1975. Unfortunately, Russia has taken on a more belligerent tone as of late, and within two to three years will be in a position to leverage manned space exploration against the U.S. – at least until the next generation Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle (C.E.V.) is completed by NASA, which will be a little under a decade after the cessation of the Shuttle program. Consequently, the U.S. needs to be delicate in its dealings with Russia, or else if it continues to criticize its government as it's been doing in some respect, it may jeopardize U.S. manned space exploration once the time comes to retire Atlantis, Discovery and Endeavor.

Of course, one must look at recent events in the Middle East, where Iran reports to have successfully launched a missile into space. Iran's Explorer-1 made it into space, but Iran did not release any details regarding the rocket's altitude. In 2005, Iran announced that it had allocated $500 million for space projects in the next five years

(compared to the roughly $17 billion budget for NASA). Although Iran's space program pales in comparison to the other established spacefaring nations, this launch sets a dangerous precedent and further complicates U.S.-Iranian relations. Iran claims peaceful purposes, namely launching satellites into space, and while they gain nothing from being hostile, but as U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said on February 4th, "It is just another troubling development." Still, this action provides the U.S. and its space allies with a unique opportunity to engage Iran in a positive manner and use space as a strategic diplomatic tool. Engagement and the promise of space cooperation may very be the best deterrent to Iran's continuation of missile development, this time using the carrot instead of the stick.

Meanwhile, all eyes will be on China, which as of yet has no intention to cooperate with the international space community on its space plans. China has launched its own Lunar orbiter, the Chang'e I, and plans to build its own manned space capabilities with the hopes of one day landing an unmanned rover on the Moon, returning lunar soil and rock samples back to the Earth, and perhaps then landing human beings on the Moon. All of China's missions are launched on its powerful Long March rocket, and its Shenzhou spacecraft are designed to be compatible with the International Space Station. Yet when China asked to be a part of the International Space Station, NASA refused, most likely for political reasons. This was a strategic error for the U.S., for the politicizing of space may very well lead to the militarization of space. If we want to begin the process of serious change in China, then we need to engage China. Instead, the recent arrests of four spies linked to China's effort to discover information about the U.S. Space Shuttle indicate China's growing interest in U.S. space technology.

However, the type of engagement needed with China is different from the kind of tact needed with Iran. China's space program is farther along and more advanced than Iran's, meaning that the U.S. can't simply offer the promise of some kind of cooperation, because the Chinese may very well decide that it is in their interests to not have their space program dependent on NASA in anyway, whereas Japan, Canada, Brazil, Russia and the nations that comprise the European Space Agency (ESA) must rely to some extent on the launch capabilities of NASA and the Space Shuttle. U.S.-China relations are extremely complex, but here the U.S. has a chance to use space exploration as a means of commonality to engage China and build a framework of cooperation that can eventually spread into other areas of the relationship, as well as preventing future actions that may instigate a new space race or Cold Space War.