US-Russian Cooperation in Space Pokes Holes in Conflicts on Earth

A last minute request from NASA to fly an American astronaut on Russia's Soyuz rocket opens up a wide array of interesting points.

Space.com in an article titled, "Here's how NASA just booked a last-minute trip to space on a Russian Soyuz," would note:

"The crew composition change came as a result of an earnest request from the US side," Roscosmos personnel wrote in Tuesday's statement. "NASA voiced its request only in the end of 2020, meaning the Russian side had to change the already confirmed and approved launch program. Roscosmos has taken this decision confirming its adherence to the joint agreements and the spirit of joint usage of the International Space Station."

NASA's last-minute booking of a flight on Russia's Soyuz rocket for US astronaut Mark Vande Hei is a testament to Russian launch capabilities and the dependability and flexibility of the Soyuz launch system.

It is also a testament to US-Russian cooperation and what is possible when both nations work together.
Russia Transported US Astronauts for Years

For nearly a decade Russia had flown all US astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS) after the 2011 retirement of the US space shuttle fleet. US dependence on Russian crew-launch capabilities ended when US-based aerospace company SpaceX made operational its Crew Dragon spacecraft.

Crew Dragon flew a test crew and a crew of 4 to the ISS last year on two separate missions. Despite NASA’s new US-based crew-launch option, the recent booking of a Soyuz for one of its astronauts demonstrates why cooperation is still important.

Crew Dragon will of course continue sending astronauts to the ISS, and in the future will increase its flight cadence and its flexibility, but having a reliable backup is essential to maintaining and supporting crews in orbit.

If and when Boeing’s Starliner becomes operational, the US will have two crew-launch capable spacecraft, and together with Russia’s Soyuz, this will mean even greater flexibility and reliability in getting crews to and from space, with cooperation being key to maximizing the benefits of these capabilities.

This cooperation also pokes holes in narratives emanating out of Washington and across the US corporate media, depicting the Russian government as villainous, untrustworthy and even an "adversary."

How exactly could that be true rather than a politically-motivated narrative if the US is willing to entrust the lives of its astronauts to such a nation (and having done so for a decade)?

Cooperation between NASA and Roscosmos in orbit above Earth, both of which are government space agencies of their respective nations, proves that neither nation is truly the enemy of the other and that only certain circles within the US are driving conflict here on Earth and for the benefit of a very narrow segment of America’s population (less than 1%).

US-Russian cooperation in Earth’s orbit, targeted by Washington in a bid to end it, will serve as one of several key ties that could help the US and Russia move forward in the future if and when certain circles in Washington and on Wall Street shrink from power and are replaced by more constructive interests determined to find a role for the US among other nations rather than attempting to impose US interests upon all other nations.

If these few last remaining, constructive ties between the US and Russia are cut, with some future US space projects already seemingly attempting to cut out any possible Russian role (i.e. the Lunar Gateway) the US will only find itself further isolated, not Russia. With that isolation will come a decrease in flexibility and reliability for the US and its astronauts.

For Russia, it is already exploring closer cooperation with China and its increasingly capable space program and ecosystem of private space firms, several of which are already capable of launching useful payloads into Earth orbit.

Plans for joint space stations and even lunar bases are being discussed. Chinese cooperation with Russia may in the future be a good substitute for lost opportunities with the US, but these are projects that would obviously still benefit from wider participation from nations like the US.

Unfortunately, as long as Washington insists on choosing conflict over cooperation, US-Russian cooperation in space and all of the immense achievements accomplished because of it are at risk. This recent demonstration of US-Russian cooperation in getting US astronaut Mark Vande Hei will hopefully serve as a reminder of why cooperation should be chosen instead of conflict, and hopefully not serve as one of the last examples of this constructive cooperation as Earth-bound conflict gets the better of space-bound cooperation.

Ulson Gunnar, a New York-based geopolitical analyst and writer especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.
