Russia and China Have Big Plans in Space

The trend of shifting away from the Washington-led unipolar "international order" toward multipolarism is not just unfolding here on Earth but far above it in orbit and even beyond.

Washington's continued campaign of belligerence toward Moscow has even complicated one of the few fields of constructive cooperation between the two nations, cooperation in space. This includes the 22 year old International Space Station (ISS) which is a combination of Russian, American, European and Japanese modules and host astronauts from nations around the world.

However, even this impressive achievement, both technical and in the realm of cooperation, is tainted by politics. The ISS excludes several nations from cooperation including China, an increasingly important ally of Russia (and many other nations around the globe).

The US more recently targeted its cooperation with Russia in particular by attempting to ban the sale of Russian rocket engines to US-based aerospace company, United Launch Alliance. While "security" concerns were cited, the ban was motivated in reality by the crisis in Ukraine and Washington's frustration over the rejoining of Crimea with the Russian Federation in 2014.

While the ban was partially lifted due to ULA's dependence on Russian rocket technology, efforts have continued to
sever cooperation between the US and Russia.

The Lunar Gateway project was deemed "too US-centric" for major participation by Russia, SpaceNews would report in their article, "Russia skeptical about participating in lunar Gateway." The minimizing of Russia's role in projects up in space appears to be a continuation of Washington's policies to minimize and isolate Russia's influence back on Earth.

And just as on Earth where Russia finds itself turning toward other partners to continue moving forward, it is seeking out partners up in space to continue advancing there as well.

The Guardian in its article, "China and Russia unveil joint plan for lunar space station," would report:

Russia and China have unveiled plans for a joint lunar space station, with the Russian space agency Roscosmos saying it has signed an agreement with China's National Space Administration (CNSA) to develop a “complex of experimental research facilities created on the surface and/or in the orbit of the moon”.

While it is easy for nations to propose and unveil plans, Russian-Chinese cooperation in space appears to be more than just wishful thinking. Russia has a decades-long proven track record of putting people into space using its venerated Soyuz launch system. It has not only contributed to key modules of the current ISS, but maintained the previously longest-orbiting space station in history, Mir.

Russia is also considering construction of its own national space station. Another Guardian article, this one titled, "Russia: we’ll leave International Space Station and build our own," would note:

Russia is ready to start building its own space station with the aim of launching it into orbit by 2030 if President Vladimir Putin gives the go-ahead, the head of its Roscosmos space agency has said.

The article cites a "crisis over human rights, cyberattacks and other issues" as the cause of breakdowns in an otherwise constructive relationship in space between the US and Russia. However, the Guardian's own wording and one-sided analysis of deteriorating relations points to the actual reason these ties are fraying, deliberate and dishonest Western antagonism.

Russia is clearly capable of building its own space station. It has done so before and it has maintained the skills and knowledge necessary to do so again through its continuous contributions to the ISS, the next module of which has been built by Russia and is scheduled for launch to the ISS this year.

Combined with China, this expertise in an orbital version of multipolarism may be a potent mix.

China has not only put its own "taikonauts" into space, but has tested temporary space station modules in orbit in preparation for the construction of its first permanent space station to begin this year.

New Scientist in an article titled, "China is about to start building a space station in orbit," would report:

China is about to launch the first section of a new space station, beginning an orbital construction project that is expected to end in 2022 with an outpost about a quarter of the size of the International Space Station (ISS).

The article also notes that:

The Chinese Space Station (CSS) will be the 11th crewed space station ever built. It is China’s third station, although the previous two were significantly smaller. The CSS will be slightly larger than Mir, the Soviet space station that preceded the ISS.

China has also begun the process of mastering unmanned missions to both the moon and to Mars. With Russian and Chinese space stations in Earth orbit in the years to come, a Russian-Chinese project to operate in competition with the West's Lunar Gateway appears plausible.

The implications of multiple space stations operating in Earth orbit and multiple Lunar projects taking shape for
geopolitics back on Earth means that other nations being excluded by Western-centric space programs and projects will have the opportunity to participate alongside Russia and China instead, thus creating a greater balance of power both on Earth and in orbit above it.

The West may feel its primacy slipping away, thus driving it to more overt belligerence and a general sense of insecurity about its place within the international community (and above it in space). However, it is missing a key opportunity to lead the world into a multipolar future and will instead be seen as kicking and screaming to avoid its inevitable emergence.

The West's expertise and accomplishments in space are impressive, but its lack of interest in cooperating with nations like Russia and China only seem to ensure that the conflict and violence the West has driven on Earth for decades will spread into and continue onward in space into the foreseeable future.

But just like on Earth, cooperation and multipolarism led by Russia and China could help minimize the danger of this belligerence and drive unprecedented development and human achievement both on Earth and beyond it.

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