

FUTUREtakes

Transcultural Futurist Magazine

ISSN 1554-7744

Vol. 3, no. 2 (Summer 2004)

Space Security via the Olympic Spirit

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By the end of the year, China means to join the United States and the former Soviet Union as only the third nation to launch humans into space. This historic attempt may very well occur within the UN dedicated World Space Week (October 4-10). October 4 is also the anniversary of Sputnik. Some feel that the Chinese attempt will translate into a new security threat to the U.S. as did Sputnik 46 years ago. Others feel that this event could be the beginning of active international cooperation in space. Could the anticipated global Olympic spirit of Athens 2004 be carried into geo-strategic unity in space?

The Chinese say that they aim to go to the Moon on their own so that they can be able to “actively join international activities for Mars exploration.” This is key phrase to examine. What has been described as the “flotilla” of US, EU and Japanese probes to Mars this year is not exactly “international.” Perhaps for good reasons they are, at least for now separate national missions. However, a joint mission is being planned between the EU and Japan to send a probe to Mercury in 2010. Other joint projects in satellite development have been undertaken by Germany and China and Brazil and China. The Chinese also say that launching humans into space is the equivalent in terms of being “regarded as an influential and powerful country” as their obtaining nuclear weapons in the 1960s. Does the desire to be “influential and powerful” translate into the desire to dominate the U.S.? Or, are these words merely an expression of national pride?

In either case, if China devoted resources to assist in launch missions to the International Space Station (ISS), theoretically this allocation would take away from resources the Chinese would otherwise devote to the development of strategic ballistic missile technology; as well as asymmetric cyber weaponry. As amateur sport is useful in determining the real character of individuals, we could use Chinese involvement aboard the ISS to learn more about their technological proclivities and vice versa. This might result not only in a more accurate security assessment on both sides but actually a bona fide improvement in the Sino/American and the Sino/Western relationships.

The Homeplanet Defense Institute (HDI) proposes that the state of global security in space and on Earth is directional and on a continuum between international anarchy and dynamic co-exploration. The question we should be asking is: Are we moving forward or backward along the security continuum and at what rate? On one end of the continuum, weaponized anarchy reigns supreme – the law of the jungle, where every nation and sub-state actor would deploy weapons in space. Some might argue from a negative view of human nature that equilibrium of power on this side of the continuum is achievable and can in fact result in general or at least temporary security. Others might argue, also from a negative view

of human nature that equilibrium can exist on the other half of the spectrum – that security can best be achieved through treaties, prepared for by confidence building measures that engage in cooperative activities in space.

HDI maintains a positive view of human nature. Instead of using cooperative activities in space as a means to the end of terrestrial security (such as the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz mission of Nixon’s détente), HDI believes that co-exploration is a legitimate end in itself. Just as the pan Hellenic athletic festivals of the ancient Athenians were unifying factors in Greek life, terrestrial security could also naturally occur as a by-product of expanded human endeavor.

We as nations and as individuals, if properly invested in by governments and corporations might become so fixated on colonizing various celestial bodies of our solar system as well as defending Earth from potential asteroids and comets that we would not have the inclination to prepare to fight on Earth. This approach could in effect “de-weaponize” space by fostering good intentions rather than imposing restrictions on dual use capabilities through treaties. HDI believes that the norm of international relations could become dynamic space co-exploration on an intercontinental (or at least interregional) and intercultural basis - the Olympic spirit in space!

Mars exploration and planetary defense would fit into the concept of a Department of Peace proposed by Representative Dennis Kucinich. However, HDI is opposed to the call by Kucinich and others to ban weapons in space. Reducing capabilities for hostility through treaties is usually counter-productive in the long run and rarely enforceable. If Kucinich and others really want to preserve “peace in space,” they should work to transform the intentions of national and sub-national actors on Earth by calling for various common endeavors in space. Instead of shaming nations for exhibiting technological ingenuity to achieve violent ends, international agreements should appeal to the better angels of our ingenuity.

For example, under a current treaty with Russia, the U.S. is prohibited from beaming high-power lasers from outer space. This inhibits commercial interests from harnessing solar radiation in space before it is diluted by our atmosphere or stored in our vegetation. This potential breakthrough technology that could foster peace and prosperity for all of Earth through commerce is held back by treaty commitments that are designed to do the same.

HDI believes that it is possible to develop these and other renewable technologies in concert with both the technological and social traditions of Eastern civilizations as well as indigenous civilizations. When we harness and harmonize rather than subdue and dominate in our approach to both technology and other peoples, the charge that the U.S. seeks to control everything and everyone in existence, HDI predicts will quickly fade from the face of Earth.

Quotes to consider

“Violence is not a natural human trait. If it was so, human society would not have lasted so long.”
 Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th and current Dali Lama

“Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” Horace Mann