

U.S. losing its lead in space, experts warn Congress

November 24 2009, By Robert S. Boyd

America's once clear dominance in space is eroding as other nations, including China, Iran and North Korea, step up their activities, a panel of experts told the House subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics Thursday.

"Others are catching up fast," said Marty Hauser, vice president for Washington operations at the [Space](#) Foundation, an advocacy organization headquarters in Colorado Springs. "Of particular note over the past decade is the emergence of China's human spaceflight capabilities."

Russia now leads the world in space launches. China recently became the third nation, after the United States and Russia, to send its own astronauts out for a spacewalk.

"China is laying the groundwork for a long-term space program with or without us," said Scott Pace, director of the Space Policy Institute at George Washington University in Washington. "We should worry if we're not out there with them."

China's rocket launch facilities are "state of the art," Hauser said.

In a competition once limited to the U.S. and the Soviet Union, 60 nations now have their own space agencies, panelists said. Thirteen nations have active space programs, and eight are capable of launching their own satellites into orbit.

In the last 10 years, the number of countries with communications satellites or GPS systems in orbit has increased from 27 to 37, according to Ray Williamson, executive director of the Secure World Foundation, a space advocacy organization headquartered in Superior, Colo.

"Countries as diverse as Algeria, Iran, Nigeria, Venezuela, South Africa and Turkey have now become part of the so-called space club," he said.

Last year, China launched a Venezuelan-owned communications satellite that "enabled Venezuela to extend its influence throughout Latin America and the Caribbean," Williamson said. The satellite broadcasts Venezuela's TeleSUR channel, which Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has styled as the alternative to U.S.-based news broadcasts.

So far, the United States operates the only complete set of global positioning satellites (GPS) in orbit, but Russia will launch the final six satellites to complete its own system next March, according to J.P. Stevens, vice president of the Aerospace Industries Association, a trade organization for the commercial space industry. India and Japan also are building their own GPS systems.

Panelists attributed the relative decline in U.S. space leadership to NASA's fluctuating budgets and repeated changes of direction as administrations and congresses come and go. The end of Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union is also responsible for the loss of interest.

Most subcommittee members support the U.S. space programs because their districts are involved in the aerospace industry.

Stevens contended that space technology is important to America's economic and military capabilities, but the U.S. now holds only 15 percent of the global commercial space market.

"Our leadership is no longer guaranteed," Stevens said "We're being undercut."

The U.S. share of global launch capabilities and communications satellites "dropped off seriously in the last decade," Pace said.

Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., the subcommittee chairwoman, said other nations have seen the benefits of space exploration, but this country is having doubts.

"At a time when some in the [United States](#) seem to be questioning whether we should sustain a strong commitment to investing in our space program, the rest of the world has not hesitated to embrace the promise that the exploration and utilization of outer space can offer to them," Giffords said.

"We should never ever cede American leadership," said Rep. Pete Olson of Texas, the ranking Republican on the subcommittee.

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