

Earthly politicians seek roadmap for space exploration (Update)

January 9 2014, by Jo Biddle



International delegates and supporting staff attend the US government hosted International Space Exploration Forum January 9, 2014, in the Loy Henderson Conference Room at the US Department of State in Washington, DC

Seeking to boldly go where few politicians have gone before, more than 30 space-faring nations gathered Thursday to map out ways to pool mankind's efforts to explore the stars.

The US State Department hosted the talks, bringing together high-level envoys both from American allies and from countries traditionally seen as rivals in the race to conquer space.

"We all share a deep stake in extending humanity's reach further into the solar system, advancing innovation further and faster and extending the benefits of discovery to more people in more places," Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns said.

"The question facing us today is whether we can muster the courage and political will to advance space exploration and ensure that cooperation continues to trump competition."

Countries such as Brazil, China, Japan, India and Russia have all sent delegations to the first ever such ministerial-level meeting focusing on space exploration—with participants listening to simultaneous translations through headsets (though no Klingon language was offered).

During the Cold War, Russia and the United States aggressively competed to be the first to launch a manned rocket into space and to put man on the moon.

In 1969 Neil Armstrong seared his name into the history books when he made his "giant leap for mankind," becoming the first man to walk on the moon, and marking a pinnacle of US technological achievement.

But in recent decades the US has scaled back public funding for the space program, dropping plans to return to the moon and relying more on private companies.

Instead President Barack Obama called on NASA to focus on new, deep-space capabilities to carry people to an asteroid by 2025 and Mars by 2030.

Powerhouses China, Japan and India are now also making a bid for supremacy in space. Last year, China made the first lunar landing in over four decades when its Jade Rabbit rover vehicle drove onto the moon's

surface.

And in November India successfully lifted into orbit a spacecraft bound for Mars as it bids to become the first Asian nation to reach the Red Planet.

While many countries already work together on space projects—including the \$100-billion International Space Station (ISS)—the aim of Thursday's talks was to begin to set out guidelines for global cooperation for future efforts to explore deep into our solar system, and maybe even beyond.

"As the number of space faring nations increases, as states' monopoly on knowledge and technology erodes, and as commercial interest in space exploration grows, international cooperation will prove more important than ever," Burns said.

More countries should be encouraged to take part in the ISS, and private efforts "vital to the next era of space exploration" should be boosted.

And there could also be greater collaboration in defending the planet from space debris and near Earth objects, Burns said.

Heavy demands on over-stretched national budgets mean that "ambitious space exploration programs are beyond the individual capabilities of most countries," said Paul Weissenberg, director general for Enterprise and Industry at the European Commission.

"Investing in space today is investing in employment, growth, innovation for tomorrow."

Such investments should not be considered a "luxury," but would reap dividends for research, new technologies, medical breakthroughs and job

creation, he added.

"These are investments for the future of mankind," agreed Enrico Saggese, president of the Italian space agency, highlighting the "the responsibility as open-minded explorers" to build up an "international space cooperation platform for peaceful purposes."

Although NASA on Wednesday said the orbiting space laboratory the ISS would now operate for four more years, until 2024, the International Space Exploration Forum is already looking well into the future.

"Space exploration, through its broadening of the realms of human potential, is of common value to mankind," said Japan's minister for science and technology, Hakubun Shimomura.

But any international cooperation had to be "politically and financially sustainable," and he called for a "clear roadmap for the continuation of space exploration beyond the ISS."

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Citation: Earthly politicians seek roadmap for space exploration (Update) (2014, January 9) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-01-earthly-politicians-roadmap-space-exploration.html>

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