

# NASA uses Russian crisis to push for US-run 'taxi' to space station

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Russia's annexation of Crimea may have put the world economy on edge, but for the U.S. rocket industry, at least, the standoff over Ukraine hasn't been all bad. Since the showdown began, NASA officials, along with industry groups and politicians such as U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, have renewed calls to speed up the creation of a U.S.-run "taxi service" to the International Space Station.

The goal is to free NASA from having to pay Russia to fly U.S. astronauts to the outpost. The service is costing NASA about \$1.7 billion from 2012 to 2017.

In a Tuesday blog post, NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden blamed Congress for not giving NASA enough money to fund the taxi service, which would pay U.S. rocket companies to transport NASA astronauts to the station.

"Later today (Tuesday), NASA astronaut Steve Swanson will lift off towards the International Space Station, not from the Space Coast of Florida or some other American spaceport, but from Kazakhstan on a Russian spacecraft," Bolden wrote. "And unfortunately, the plan put forward by the Obama administration to address this situation has been stymied by some in Congress."

After a successful launch, Swanson and his Russian crew mates were supposed to reach the station Tuesday, but trouble with thrusters on their Soyuz spacecraft has delayed the rendezvous until Thursday.

In making his case, Bolden did not suggest that the U.S.-Russia partnership in space was about to splinter because of Russia's annexation of Crimea, a former Ukrainian territory.

But he argued that if Congress had fully funded NASA's taxi service, the agency would have the option to pay U.S. companies, such as Boeing and SpaceX, for these flights much sooner instead of relying on Russia. NASA has paid Russia to transport its astronauts since the U.S. retired the space shuttle in 2011.

"Recognizing that this was unacceptable, President Obama has requested in NASA's budget more than \$800 million each of the past five years to incentivize the American aerospace industry to build the spacecraft needed to launch our astronauts from American soil," Bolden wrote.

"Had this plan been fully funded, we would have returned American human spaceflight launches - and the jobs they support - back to the United States next year."

Instead, Bolden wrote, the first U.S. flight won't be until at 2017 at the earliest. The pressure on NASA to find a long-term solution has only grown this year, as the White House recently agreed to extend the life of the station by four years until 2024.

The Commercial Spaceflight Federation, which acts as a booster for the industry, echoed Bolden's urgency in a release earlier this month.

"Rapidly developing American spacecraft to fly NASA astronauts is crucial to end NASA's dependency on Russia," the group said.

A report issued last fall by NASA's inspector general, which acts as the agency's internal watchdog, estimated that the taxi service, known as the [commercial crew](#) program, has received about \$1.1 billion less than what

the White House has requested. Like Bolden, the inspector general expected a first flight no earlier than 2017.

But investigators also raised concerns about early contracts NASA has cut with U.S. rocket companies because the agreements restrict NASA's ability to control how the spacecraft are built.

"These limitations make it more difficult to ensure that the companies will ultimately produce spaceflight systems that meet agency requirements and that NASA can be confident they will safely carry its astronauts to and from the ISS," the authors noted.

Members of Congress have flagged similar concerns in years past, which is one reason they have not agreed to fund the commercial crew program at levels sought by the White House.

"We must continue to weigh whether potential cost savings come at the expense of overall capabilities, robustness or safety," said U.S. Rep. Steven Palazzo, R-Miss., chairman of the House space subcommittee, at a hearing last year that examined the U.S. spacecraft industry.

Bolden is scheduled to appear before the subcommittee Thursday, and the Russian standoff is almost certain to come up.

A tough budget environment also has contributed to reduced funding for the commercial crew program. Lawmakers have made it a priority to route federal dollars to the development of a new NASA rocket and space capsule, dubbed the Space Launch System and Orion, respectively, for missions beyond low Earth orbit.

"There are some people who don't like the commercial crew program, and they think it is taking away from the SLS and Orion," said Nelson, a Florida Democrat. "The fact is, we've got to do both."

Funding for the commercial crew program appears to be on the upswing. In the 2014 budget, the program was set at \$696 million - a notch above the \$525 million allocated for 2013. The White House is seeking \$848 million in 2015, according to NASA budget documents.

Advocates say the recent success of cargo flights to the station, launched by U.S. companies such as SpaceX and Orbital Sciences, have helped make the case. Another such SpaceX flight is set to fly from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station at 10:49 p.m. Sunday.

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