

The Problematic China-U.S. Aerospace Relationship

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Stephen Uhalley

I begin by calling attention to what I call the “AMS-2 Anomaly,” wherein we have an exceedingly important and expensive scientific instrument, the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer (AMS), in orbit with the International Space Station (ISS). That the AMS is operational at present is only because it includes an essential Chinese-made component. This is not publicized, probably because China has not been permitted to participate in either the erstwhile shuttle program or the ISS. Yet there it is, and we are reminded of this anomaly daily as this marvelous instrument passes overhead. That such an anomaly can come about is because we have a confused national space policy overall, and the part of it that has to do with China is just as out of sorts.

The awkward situation is exacerbated overall by the atmospherics of current domestic political differences and by the intimidating fiscal/budgetary crisis. Adequate funding will remain problematic going forward. But, as we move beyond the election this November it would be well to get on with shaping up our national space policy and program, including determining the shape of our space relationship with China.

In the meantime, it bears recognizing that despite inherent tensions in the complicated U.S.-China relationship there is, in fact, already a measure of cooperation in the subfields of civil and general aviation. This does not extend to military aviation, and because the Chinese space program is dominated by the military there is no cooperation there either, except peripherally.

Yet, there are reasons to remain open to some cooperation with China in space, at least in order to realize common benefits, particularly with scientific missions. Cooperation can facilitate the sharing of the enormous costs. And the serious dangers confronting humans in space necessitates as much effective cooperation as is practicable.

Of course, as desirable as cooperation may be, such hopes are necessarily trumped by national security concerns. These concerns are fueled by the quickening rise of the insufficiently transparent military component of what is after all a very large undemocratic party-state that is not an ally and with which there are serious differences. The apparent deteriorating strategic trust between the U.S. and China is a consideration, as is Chinese spying and the relentless acquisition, often underhanded, of proprietary American know-how. Taiwan’s security remains an irritant in the equation.

Nevertheless, a reasoned and coherent national space policy and attendant supportive measures should be priorities. Once these come to be realized, a sense of direction and fuller purposefulness in space for Americans can be restored. On such a basis, the U.S. can better identify appropriate goals or parameters to have in mind when opportunities are presented to negotiate space cooperation with China.