

The Causes of the New Space Race

Written by Daryl Morini

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DARYL MORINI, SEP 17 2012

Last month, I wrote a piece on *The Diplomat* about a coming U.S.-China space race. It was designed as a conversation opener, and I was glad that it sparked some reactions.

The political science graduate and blogger, Taylor Marvin, was kind enough to offer a considered rebuttal of my main argument that a U.S.-China space race was happening, or would happen, in our lifetime.

Marvin added some important nuances to our conversation, which my original blog entry could not include. He is right to insist on the historical context of the first space race during the Cold War, in all its technological, geopolitical and ideological uniqueness.

For one, Marvin noted that to speak of a U.S.-China space race, “with its grand historical allusions, poorly characterizes this rivalry.” Some prefer to speak of a Sino-American “ASAT race”, referring to the Anti-Satellite capabilities which have been driving this space rivalry. Others, such as Erik Seedhouse, prefer to call a spade a spade and speak of a broad-spectrum, military and civil “space race” between the U.S. and China. The use of the concept to describe the U.S.-China competition in space has been around since at least 2003, and I claim no originality in using the term.

Despite his excellent points, I still think that a new space race in our lifetime is likely.

From the invention of gunpowder to the nuclear age, no military-technological breakthrough has long stagnated in a world of competing powers. If science drives progress, the military steps on the accelerator. Numerous, and often shocking, examples abound in the history of every war. Just as World War I did not end all wars, so the first space race was the start of a new era in human history, not its apogee. There is no guarantee that we will not repeat it.

The most important question is therefore not what we should call the dangerous dynamic of space weaponisation and increasingly open scientific-military competition in the heavens between the U.S. and China. Many analysts in English-speaking publications conclude that it is occurring, even if they disagree on the form it is taking.

Therefore, the key questions become: How can we understand the driving causes of this competition in space? And are there practical ways to limit or prevent it?

Two points. Firstly, in answer to the first question, the increasing level of distrust and even worst-case planning of the U.S. and China with regards to the other’s space programmes is arguably part of the broad-spectrum U.S.-China geopolitical competition down on Earth.

Secondly, the one point authors on U.S.-China space policy seem to agree on is the pessimistic one that the weaponisation of space is more or less inevitable, and that it is now only a question of delaying it, or limiting the damage. I remain optimistic that there are many possible solutions within reach to prevent a weaponised space race with China.

I will leave discussion of proposals to prevent or limit the new space race for another day. Suffice is to say that peace

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starts on Earth. As such, a new space race can either be prevented through a bold and comprehensive agreement down on this spinning rock – addressing the grievances and (earth-bound) strategic ambitions of both powers – or not at all.

Before prescribing solutions, however, we must come to a common diagnosis of the root causes of this new space race.

If there is one point on which we may spend words thriftily, it is that the U.S. and China are already engaged in a broad-spectrum strategic competition. As Hillary Clinton said bluntly before Congress last year: “Let’s put aside the humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in. Let’s just talk straight realpolitik. We are in competition with China.” Full stop.

The new space race is the logical extension of that strategic competition.

As experts explain, bilateral cooperation on space matters has worsened to the point of NASA officials being instructed, due to fears of China acquiring their technological knowhow, to avoid speaking to their Chinese colleagues during a six-week conference held in 2008 *in Beijing*. Such intellectual segregation has been U.S. policy since 1999. But it only shows signs of worsening.

Soon after China’s 2007 ASAT test, a senior Chinese PLA official, Col. Yao Yunzhu, publically predicted that outer space “is going to be weaponized in our lifetime.” Clearly alluding to the United States, she added that, if there is a space superpower, “it’s not going to be alone, and China is not going to be the only one.” The way I read the blanks in that statement, it either means that the U.S. will face China, or China and others, in space

However, some argue, today’s context is completely different to the Cold War era: China is not an aggressive, expansionist empire; China no longer espouses a revolutionary ideological model; China’s military budget is infinitesimal compared to that of its American competitor.

Each point is right in isolation, but also misses the larger point.

China’s economic power, as Hugh White reiterates time and again in his new book, is larger relative to the United States than the Soviet Union’s ever was. This has major implications. For all its scientific-technological prowess (often bloated by communist propaganda) during the Cold War, the USSR simply lacked the economic base to challenge the U.S. credibly.

China does not.

As David Axe put it, “China is accruing capabilities to compromise and harm U.S. space assets to a degree not seen since the Soviet Union confronted the U.S. in the Cold War.”

Indeed, China is no longer a third-rate space power. Imagining a world in which China sets foot on the moon by the end of the decade – when it will have overtaken the U.S. economy – is not a wild exaggeration. Put plainly, it is a feasible and realistic scenario.

“First place in space for China,” Professor de Montluc recently wrote on e-IR, “would be such a shock that it could at last stimulate the creativity of the space policies of the other nations in the world after 2020.” He thinks that it “might even encourage a more international approach to space conquest in the 21st century.” Maybe. Or it could just as feasibly touch off the most aggressive phase of space competition humanity has yet known, symbolically crowning a deepening Cold War back on earth. Nobody can know for sure; at least not yet.

But if money is the sinews of war, then this space race will be more formidable than the last.

The U.S.-China competition is not about ideology; perhaps the Cold War never truly was either. Regardless, this

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modern great power stand-off has the potential to redefine the international pecking order. The motive of prestige – associated with great power status since nations went to war over diplomatic protocol and seating orders – will drive the new space race as it did the last.

Those who point to this time being different to the Cold War are right. But this is the main difference: China has the economic foundation and perhaps ambition to see this race through. This might yet fuel the U.S. motivation to run it, too. Ignoring the problem is not a prudent option.

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