

COULD THE ISS BECOME A RUSSO-EUROPEAN PROJECT?

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It is becoming increasingly difficult to tally US declarations about the International Space Station (ISS) with reality. On the one hand, President Bush and NASA have given repeated assurances that the US still sees the ISS as a unique international project in manned space flight. On the other hand, words alone cannot make equipment, especially sophisticated space equipment, keep functioning. Money is needed for the final version of the space station to appear in all its beauty, complete with new Russian and US-Canadian elements, the European Columbus orbital facility and the Japanese Kibo module.

However, are the requisite funds available? Until the US resumes shuttle flights, all the ISS can do is try to survive. No matter how great Russia's space capabilities may be, while the shuttles are grounded the station has to operate on a minimum skeleton crew of two. So, it appears that before the shuttles fly off into the sunset of a well-deserved retirement, a great deal of work will have been done. Firstly, this means enabling astronauts to live on the ISS on a permanent basis. Secondly, the further construction of the US and Canadian modules is pointless without the shuttles, as the entire orbital equipment was designed exactly for this transport system.

When commenting on NASA plans for the old shuttles, Nikolai Moiseyev, deputy director of Russia's Federal Space Agency, quoted the US side as saying that "considerable funds would be required for this, but Congress has not yet approved them. The sum in question is about one billion dollars, which is an issue for even such a wealthy country as the United States." So, there may be some good intentions, but the cash is obviously a problem.

Finally, it looks like the Americans simply fear the ISS. Here is just one example. A New York Times report featured a senior NASA official who

preferred to remain anonymous categorically rejecting the idea of using the ISS as a shelter for shuttle crews in emergencies. The argument is based on expert conclusions that the space station's present life–support system could not cope with the increased demand for oxygen, water and food. The figures are as follows: the experience of servicing orbital stations shows that the average period a crew of nine can survive is 59.6 days. The conclusion was that there would still not be enough time for another shuttle to complete a rescue operation. Russian Soyuz rescue spaceships were totally ignored, as if the Russian partners simply did not exist.

Perhaps the benchmark for NASA employees' qualifications has dropped? No, this is not true. Perhaps the shuttles have technical problems that make the experts wary about resuming flights? If this is the case, it should be stated openly and a solution should be found together.

However, maybe the objectives have changed and NASA no longer cares about the space station or the old shuttles? After all, there is Russia, which alone carries the entire burden of the ISS programme, and has not intention of stopping midway.

Moreover, it co–operates with the other ISS partners, i.e., the Europeans, who no longer want merely to watch the beautiful trails left by US spacecraft as they leave the Earth. A programme to launch European automatic transport ships has been completely coordinated between the European Space Agency and Russia's Federal Space Agency. The Arian–5 heavy carrier rocket, Europe's leading craft, will orbit the first such ship, the Jules Verne, in October 2005.

Accordingly, with its growing scientific and technological capabilities, Europe intends to join the manned space flight programme. And Russia's position on the ISS is perfectly clear. "We have expressed our principled stand to our partners – the unconditional observance of our commitments to all the participants is a major task for Russia," Nikolai Moiseyev said recently. "At the same time, from 2005 it may be considered that all the commitments have been honoured. Therefore, the development of the Russian segment at the ISS and support for the activities of the Russian crew there is becoming a priority for us."

It will be interesting to see if Houston reads this loud and clear.