

US Space Force Wants to Disrupt Russia-China Space Cooperation

Both Russia and China have been responding to the US militarization of space by enhancing their own capabilities, both separately and jointly.

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Close strategic partnership between Russia and China has been the mainstay of their relationship for decades. The US has been trying to disrupt this successful partnership ever since, especially as Russia started regaining its strength, but the incessant belligerent actions of the imperialist thalassocracy have pushed the two (Eur)Asian superpowers even closer. This cooperation is manifold, but its space component is particularly concerning for the US, as it has serious security implications. The Pentagon is worried that the US “might not be able to match the united financing and know-how” of Moscow and Beijing.

“The two countries’ space cooperation, including in the military realm, has become inextricable since 2018 and works against U.S. interests,” said Kevin Pollpeter, senior research scientist at the CNA think tank’s China Studies Division. “I don’t think we can separate China and Russia. I just don’t think that’s possible,” Pollpeter said in response to a question from Air Force Magazine following a panel discussion on China-Russia space cooperation at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C.

“While the countries do not have completely overlapping security concerns, they do share a strong desire to counter U.S. leadership, including in outer space,” he said. “What we need to do is, we need to mitigate whatever problems that relationship may cause for us. The two countries’ military space cooperation includes the areas of ballistic missile defense, space debris monitoring, and satellite navigation. The resulting exchange has included technology transfer, weapons sales, combined exercises, and compensating measures,” Pollpeter added.

In 1989, the US imposed sanctions on China, targeting Beijing’s defense and space industry. China looked to Russia for the necessary technology transfers and by 1997, the two countries started regular cooperation in space. Russia had the know-how, but its space industry was faced with severe funding shortages.

“...a number of embargoes that took place made [China] increasingly more reliant on Russia as a potential source of technology, particularly for dual use and defense,” said Pollpeter. “...China started looking more to Russia, and Russia started looking more to China for help with supporting their own space program.”

China also began cooperating with Russia on ballistic missile defense after the US unilaterally withdrew from the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty in 2019. In the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that [Russia would assist China in creating a ballistic missile early warning system](#). At the time, Putin said that China was perfectly capable of creating such a system itself, but that it would take longer, so Russia decided to aid Beijing in enhancing its strategic security in light of aggressive US moves in the Asia-Pacific region.

“There appears to be some sort of technology transfer going on,” Pollpeter added. “There’s been joint exercises – the Aerospace Security 2016 and 2017 involved joint air and missile defense planning and coordination.”

According to Pollpeter, another area of cooperation, space debris monitoring, “may sound innocuous,” but he claims “it has security implications.”

“If you have a space debris monitoring system, then you actually have a space domain awareness or space surveillance system,” he said. “This very much has a military role in helping China and Russia better monitor U.S. movements up in space.”

The US Space Force is particularly concerned about how “little is known about the satellite navigation cooperation between the two nations.” According to Pollpeter, other than the fact that there are compatibility and interoperability between the Russian and Chinese equivalents to GPS, the GLONASS and BeiDou navigation systems, nothing else is known about the security component of this cooperation. What is supposedly known is “the presence of augmentation stations in each other’s countries and performance monitoring,” Pollpeter claims.

“What they really want to do, then, is demonstrate that in a world where the U.S. and China could come into military conflict, they have an alternative,” he said. “They don’t have to rely on BeiDou exclusively. They also have the Russian system.”

As China doesn’t publicly discuss its space defense capabilities, Pollpeter claims it’s currently unknown which level of cooperation have Moscow and Beijing reached in this regard.

“A lot of it’s so opaque that when you get into something like counterspace, they’re not going to discuss that,” he said. “What China is developing is a capability that really is designed to threaten the United States space architecture from the ground all the way up to geosynchronous orbit.”

Existing agreements indicate close Chinese and Russian cooperation on launch vehicles, rocket engines, space planes, lunar and deep space exploration, remote sensing, electronics, space debris, satellite navigation and communication. Pollpeter thinks the US Space Force cannot halt the China-Russia cooperation, but it could do more to mitigate its effects.

“There’s really little we can do to separate the two countries, especially [on] the space

side,” he said. “The distrust and, let’s say, to some extent, animosity of both countries towards the U.S. sort of precludes, at this point, that any of those efforts can be successful.”

As the US state-run space sector kept falling behind, private companies, the most prominent certainly being SpaceX, [started closely cooperating with the US military](#). Both Russia and China have been responding to the US militarization of space by enhancing their own capabilities, both separately and jointly. [While China started deploying pilotless spaceplanes](#), Russia is [building land-based laser weapons to counter US space threats](#) and is also [launching its own spacecraft to track US space assets](#).

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