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EVOLUTION OF SPACE EXPLORATION POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract

The U.S. policy on space exploration has undergone significant changes over the past few years, and there has been considerable debate on what the future will hold. As of March 2011, NASA is in somewhat of a holding pattern, with expenditures and work continuing on infrastructure for the Constellation program despite general agreement in the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government that this program will not continue in its current incarnation. Numerous policy documents, budgets, and statements have been released by NASA, the President, and the U.S. Congress. This paper looks at the evolution of U.S. space exploration policy over the past five years, and attempts to describe the policy-making process during this period. It describes changes and decisions that took place in U.S. space exploration policy, and analyzes current debates to provide some indication of future issues and directions for this policy.

The Vision for Space Exploration provided the basis for the NASA exploration policy currently in place. The paper compares the original plans and budget estimates for the development the exploration infrastructure within the Vision to the actual NASA budget outlays and activities in the Exploration Mission Directorate since it was announced. The arguments put forward by the Augustine Commission, which conducted a review of NASA's exploration policy in 2009, are presented. The paper then compares the funding levels provided for exploration in President Obama's FY 2010 budget proposal and the House and Senate versions of the NASA Authorization Bill, along with a description of each organization's specific vision for future U.S. Space exploration. Although Congress passed the NASA Authorization Act of 2010, and this act was signed into law by the president, no appropriations bill was passed. The most current proposals for the future U.S. space exploration policy can be found in the President's FY 2011 Budget Proposal and in current debates within the House and Senate on the FY 2011 budget. The funding levels and policy proposals within these documents are compared and discussed.

The goal of this paper is to provide a clear picture of the process of policy change occurring within the U.S. government, including overviews of the various actors, documents, and items of debate. In addition to providing a clear understanding of these developments, the paper will attempt to explain future steps within the policy process and likely issues and directions for future development.