

22nd SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE POLICY, REGULATIONS AND ECONOMICS (E3)
Launcher Policies and Regulations (3)

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THE SPACE CLUB- SPACE POLICIES AND POLITICS

Abstract

Indigenous development of large scale national projects like space programs is often explained by material-functional needs or by geostrategic conditions. This approach fails to explain national investments in impractical projects like space exploration, human spaceflight, and even development of capabilities for practical use that are available through foreign or commercial suppliers in much lower costs. It also does not provide an adequate explanation to the fact that achievements of this kind are often dubbed by state officials, and the media, as an act of joining an exclusive club.

To explain this phenomenon this paper turns to theoretical arguments of the constructivist approach to international relations, in which states preferences and policies are not necessarily subject to state conditions or apparent functional needs. Rather preferences are shaped by the international society and by specific national characteristics and narratives.

With respect to the “space-club”, this paper posits the argument that states were socialized in the era of the Cold War race to space to observe space capability as a symbol and as a means of power and glory. The result was a shared convention that the development of national space programs is a key to national empowerment and enhanced social standing. But, out of the rivalry and competition came also restrictions on access to the technology and know-how that made it highly exclusive. This process led to the evolvement of the “space club concept.” In this context social and political factors and needs, as well as objective conditions, affected the way this convention was actually implemented in national space policies.

The paper points out, that aspirations to high and exclusive status, prestige, self-esteem and pride, identification and affiliation with superior actors, and distinction from lower/ weaker actors (that manifest the essence of what joining a club is about), are part of policy and decision making. Although the “space club” is a concept or a metaphor, rather than an international organization, it has meaning in world politics and is used extensively in political jargon. Investigation of its meaning and roots allows a better understanding of motivations, policies and politics of space activity.

This paper is part of a PhD research that combines historical attention to the changes and development of the “space club” with analytical examination of different national space programs. It is based on extensive archival research, interviews and other methods of qualitative research design. It presents evidence of the extensive use of this concept by policy makers, leaders and the media, and analyzes its role in world politics.