

43rd HISTORY OF ASTRONAUTICS SYMPOSIUM (E4)
Memoirs and Organisational Histories (1)

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JAPANESE SPACE POLICY DURING 1980S: A BALANCE BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Abstract

Japan has launched the domestically-developed rocket, “H-IIA,” since August 2001, aiming at the entry to the satellite launch market, while it has also participated from the beginning in the “International Space Station (ISS)” program. These big space programs have been advanced under the basic principles of Japanese space activities: autonomy and international cooperation. However, as they often contradicted each other, Japan could not easily manage both autonomy and international cooperation. In the mid-1980s, Japan decided not only to invest in a totally domestic rocket, “H-II,” to acquire its independent access to space, but also to participate in the U.S. Space Station program to promote international space cooperation. The H-II rocket and the U.S. Space Station program were the predecessors of H-IIA and ISS, respectively. Not until then did Japan try to achieve simultaneously both autonomy and international cooperation.

The twin decisions were an epoch-making event in the history of Japanese space policy. Nevertheless, their decision-making processes have not in detail been examined because Japan had neither saved properly nor released to the public the government’s internal documents. For the last decade even in Japan, however, the related materials have been discovered and accumulated in addition to those saved and released in foreign countries, especially the United States.

This paper reexamines how Japan achieved a balance between autonomy and international cooperation in its space activities, from the perspective of Japan-U.S. diplomatic history. In order to do so, this paper analyzes the decision-making processes of both the H-II rocket and Japan’s participation in the U.S. Space Station program, by making the most of the materials collected until now.

Through the enactment and enforcement of its space basic law, Japan is currently struggling with a comprehensive review of its fundamental policy, national system and administrative organization for space activities. The prime issue seems to be how Japan, as one of the world’s leading nations, would rank its space activities in its politics, economy and diplomacy, and would practice them as its domestic and foreign policy. Understanding the history of Japanese space policy to date is indispensable for discussing the issue. This paper would be able to present some implications of the past Japanese space policymaking process.