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CHINA'S INCLUSION IN MULTINATIONAL SPACE EXPLORATION EFFORTS: HOW EVOLVING
ATTITUDES TOWARD INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN CHINA'S SPACE POLICY
COMMUNITY CHANGE THE PROSPECTS FOR CHINESE PARTICIPATION

Abstract

China is the most important recent entrant to the space exploration endeavour. China's participation in multinational exploration efforts to destinations such as the Moon and Mars and in precursor activities will influence how far and fast these missions proceed and how future global mechanisms and architectures for coordinated space exploration develop. Which space exploration efforts is China willing and able to join? What are Chinese priorities for international cooperation on space exploration?

This paper examines how evolving attitudes within China's emerging space policy community are changing the prospects for the country's participation in international exploration projects. Its findings are based on original research conducted in China and the United States, including interviews with over 70 Chinese aerospace professionals.

China's participation in international exploration is important. As China's exploration capabilities grow, so will its potential to support and accelerate multinational initiatives. China's participation in collaborative exploration will also facilitate its entry to the community of established spacefaring countries, a group in which rules and shared understandings that support the coordination of space exploration and responsible space conduct are emerging.

Attitudes towards international cooperation within China's emergent space policy community are changing. These changes result from the country's growing space capabilities, its enhanced international status, and a generational shift among space professionals. China has made great advances in space autonomously and is one of only a few countries in which space budgets are still growing. China's footprint on international organisations is larger than ever, and its leaders increasingly want global mechanisms for managing space to reflect China's interests and clout. China's technocrats, who saw first-hand the benefits of international participation under the Reform and Opening policy, are being replaced by a generation of more nationalistic space experts, who distrust the international community.

These factors present both opportunities and challenges to China's inclusion in multinational exploration efforts. They currently combine to reduce interest in international cooperation among China's emerging space policy elite, which emphasizes instead the autonomous development of comprehensive national space capabilities.

To reverse this trend, the international community must make a sustained and coordinated effort to engage Chinese space professionals and to understand China's space policymaking goals and priorities. The most promising means to these ends is the fostering of an internationally networked Chinese space policy community that can engage in meaningful dialogue with foreign partners. Several means to this goal are available to other spacefaring countries, but remain under-utilized.