

NASA's 'first date' with China



The space agency's visit to China is overdue — the rest of the world went there long ago.

Philip Ball

This could be the start of a beautiful friendship. That, at least, is how the Chinese press seems keen to portray the visit this week by NASA head Mike Griffin, who is touring Beijing and Shanghai at the invitation of President Hu Jintao. China Central Television proudly proclaims "China, US to boost space cooperation", while China Daily reports "China-US space co-op set for lift-off".

But Griffin himself is more circumspect. "It's our get-acquainted visit, it's our exploratory visit and it's our first date," he told a press conference. Griffin stressed shortly before the visit that he did not want to "create expectations that would be possibly embarrassing to us or embarrassing to China."

Griffin's caution is understandable, given that this is the first visit to the country by a NASA administrator. But why did it take them so long? After all, China has well-established joint space projects with Europe, Russia and Brazil, and is one of only three nations to have put people into space.

Rising star

China's entry into the new space race has been swift. By 2003 the country had launched its first crewed space flight. At the end of 2004, the administrator of the Chinese National Space Agency (CNSA), Sun Laiyan, visited NASA on what might be considered their true 'first date'. And in April 2005, CNSA's vice administrator revealed the extent of China's space plans at the National Space Symposium in Colorado Springs, Colorado. These included the possibility of a manned moon shot — an announcement that made people sit up and listen.

There can be no remaining doubt that China is a serious player in space technology, however much it is a latecomer to the party. Griffin admits that "China has clearly made enormous strides in a very short period".

The 'can-do' philosophy apparent in China's domestic industrial and engineering schemes, pursued with a determination that can at times appear little short of ruthless, must surely be sounding alarms within the US space industry.

All of which makes it strange that a NASA trip to China has been so long in coming.

Enemy at the gate

The reticence must be due in large part to the fact that for many years, China has been regarded as a rival rather than a collaborator.

China's desire to become involved in the International Space Station (ISS) has previously been stymied by the United States, for example. In 2001, Dana Rohrabacher, chair of the space and aeronautics subcommittee of the US House of Representatives, told journalists he was not interested in Chinese offers to pay for ISS hardware because of the country's human-rights record. "The space station is supposed to stand for something better," he said (while seeking help from countries including the United Arab Emirates).

This reluctance is down to a considerable dose of Cold War paranoia. Griffin himself says that Russian involvement with the ISS also initially met with some resistance, although it's now clear that the space station would have been doomed without it.

Vincent Sabathier, previously space attaché at the Embassy of France in the United States, says that it comes down to attitudes to international relations: the United States adopts a 'realist' stance based on competing national interests, he says. European states, in contrast, have a more liberal approach that favours international dialogue and partnership. "While the US places an emphasis on space power and control, Europe maintains that its focus is on the peaceful use of outer space," Sabathier says. And that has allowed for plenty of collaboration.

Power of partnerships

With China going full steam ahead on its involvement with the space programmes of Russia and Europe, the United States could risk creating a powerful competitor if it doesn't join in. And preventing US companies from exporting technologies to the most rapidly growing space program in the world threatens to undercut their own competitiveness.

Fears about how China plans to use its space capabilities cannot be wholly dismissed as paranoia, however. China's defence spending has



NASA Administrator Michael Griffin (right) and US Ambassadors talk with graduate students from the Chinese Academy of Science.

NASA

increased in recent years, although it is notoriously cagey about the figures. Some worry that this strengthening of its military force and satellite technology is in part a move to intimidate Taiwan.

At this moment, it looks as though China's space ambitions are driven more by national pride — by the wish to be seen as a technological world leader. That claim is seems to be becoming increasingly justified.

Rather than worrying about losing technical secrets, China's space collaborators seem now more likely to gain some handy tips.

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