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Nelson's first NASA challenge: The space race with China | Commentary

By ROBERT WEINER AND ABBY PARAS

GUEST COLUMNISTS

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With China's recent success in landing a rover on both the moon and Mars, launching a space station with a shuttle and making an alliance with Russia on space technology, a new space race has begun, this time between China and the United States. It's the most serious challenge since Russia launched in 1957, and John F. Kennedy committed the U.S. to landing on the moon.



Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Clinton and Bush White Houses and the U.S. House Government Operations Committee.

(Richard A. Bloom / Courtesy photo)



Abby Paras is a policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change. (Courtesy photo)

Both the U.S. and China are currently focused on exploring the moon and Mars. NASA administrator Bill Nelson — former astronaut and Florida’s U.S. senator for 18 years — referred to China as “a very aggressive competitor.” Science journalist Miles O’Brien said China “wants no less than supremacy in space.” NASA’s deputy administrator Pam Melroy testified to Congress on May 20, “China has made their goals very clear — to take away space superiority from the United States.”

NASA expanded its mission from Mars to Venus to see if we want to send astronauts there. The DAVINCI+ and VERITAS missions are meant to determine if Venus’s surface and atmosphere can sustain life. However, no spacecraft has managed to survive the temperature and pressure of Venus’ surface for more than two hours — it’s way too hot (847 degrees Fahrenheit).

While NASA focuses on Venus, China's space program, the China National Space Administration (CNSA), is aimed at landing people on the moon, something NASA hasn't done since Apollo 17 in 1972. It's astounding that 52 years since the U.S. landed, we have done nothing with human beings for decades but send commuter shuttles to a space station 200 miles away. Former astronaut Mark Kelly told the National Press Club in 2016 that the U.S. had a "lack of political will" in terms of funding NASA. On January 3, 2019, China became the first mission to successfully land on the far side of the moon. They may learn first if the moon ever sustained life.

Nelson admitted the landing "should tell us something about our need to get off our duff and get our ... program going vigorously," and NASA is receiving congressional help. The Senate passed the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act that, if passed by the House, would grant \$250 billion to help the U.S. remain competitive with China's advancements. Investing in our space work force is the only way to ensure the United States maintains a critical national security advantage in space over countries like Russia and China. Elected officials, NASA, private industries, and organizations like the Machinists Union, the largest labor union at NASA for aerospace workers, should join together to invest in and grow this critical work force.

Under former President Donald Trump, NASA refocused its efforts to landing on the moon rather than Mars. Since the United States government transitioned to the Biden administration, it's crucial that NASA refocuses on making progress on Mars.

President Joe Biden proposed a \$1.5 billion increase in NASA's budget, bringing the total to \$24.7 billion. This, in addition to the bill passed by the Senate and assistance from Elon Musk's SpaceX and Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin, should allow NASA to fund missions to Mars. Rather than spending time on forming a Star Wars-like Space Force as Trump wanted, Biden's NASA needs to make real progress regarding future human possibilities. Concerns arose about Russia and China working together on dismantling U.S. space superiority. Russia recently suggested they might pull out of the International Space Station in favor of the Chinese Space Station, to be completed in 2022. Dmitry Rogozin, the director-general of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, stated, "We are planning to send our astronauts to the Chinese station."

Nelson knows that China is becoming the most significant space competitor and could cause threats to the United States' plans. Going to Venus to explore its surface and understand how the atmosphere became so toxic in the first place is fascinating to many space aficionados. However, it's a far cry from being useful.

If China can establish human presence on the moon, then NASA must stay competitive and not fall behind. Though sending humans back to the moon is an important step in space exploration, it should be the stepping stone towards getting astronauts to Mars and beyond. Congress should demonstrate the political will to fund these projects. Joe Biden must recreate the U.S. vision to proceed, as John Kennedy said back in 1962, "not because it is easy, but because it is hard."

Robert Weiner was a spokesman in the Clinton and Bush White Houses and the U.S. House Government Operations Committee. Abby Paras is policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.