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China Looks Beyond India-Japan Space Alliance to the US Connection

Peter J. Brown

India and Japan's October agreement to expand cooperation in disaster management between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) has raised the ire of a China fearful that the US is masterminding a powerful space alliance between its allies in the region.

ISRO Indian space research

All Asia wants to see improved regional disaster management capabilities, but the growing ties between ISRO and JAXA come just as India and Japan are devising an action plan to advance security cooperation.

JAXA. Earth observed from outer space

"China is concerned about the general effort of the US during the Bush Administration to form a Japanese-Indian alliance to contain China," said Dr Gregory Kulacki, senior analyst and China project manager at the Massachusetts-based Union of Concerned Scientists.

> "They are more concerned about what this implies about US intentions rather than what it implies about the intentions of the Japanese or the Indians, particularly as it concerns space."

Brian Weeden, a technical consultant at the Colorado-based Secure WorldFoundation, hesitates to agree that Indian and Japanese efforts to pursuecloser ties in space are part of a deliberate US master plan for theregion, but he does not see the US taking any steps to discourage them.

> "The US sees India as primarily a counterbalance to China in the region, but at the same time it does not see India as a full ally in the same sense as Britain or Japan. I do not think the US looks unfavorably on this relationship, but I am certain it will be examining it very closely and if the US does have concerns, they will be quietly expressed to the Japanese," said Weeden.

Whereas Japan benefits greatly from the steady deployment in the Pacific Ocean of US AEGIS ballistic missile defense (BMD) technology - it will soon be aboard all four of Japan's Kongo-class destroyers - this sea-based BMD system will probably not appear soon on any of India's warships.

Weedon also points to the most recent 'Red Flag' exercise at Nellis Air force Base in Nevada. "The Russian-built Indian fighters participating had their radars in test mode so as not to give away their full capabilities to the Americans. Likewise, the US didn't let the F-22 participate for the same reasons."

Russian-built Sukhoi Su30 aircraft, a mainstay of the Indian air force

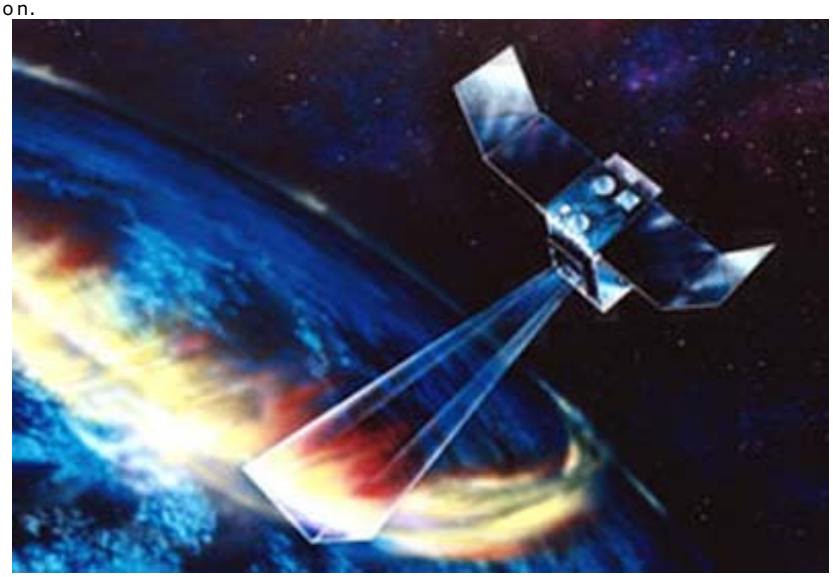
The agreement is a concern for China, as it would be for any nation whose traditional regional adversaries talk about cooperation, adds Weedon. "Most countries still see the national security angle of space as a unilateral effort and are unlikely to collaborate in that area. They will, however collaborate in scientific or civilian areas."

There is considerable turmoil in Japan concerning the future of JAXA and how much money the Japanese government should be spending on it. The situation is made more complicated by Japan's recently enacted Space Basic Law, which for the first time permits Japan to consider deployment of national security space assets, which the Japanese had denied themselves until now.

"The government of Japan, particularly the Ministry of Defense, is still sorting this out," said Aerospace consultant Lance Gatling, head of Tokyo-based Gatling Associates, which closely monitors JAXA and the Japanese space program.

Japan has been using its weather satellites to provide free weather data to countries throughout Asia for many years without any hint of controversy, but this is quite different from deploying a new generation of surveillance satellites to monitor disasters.

Virtually all existing satellite-based multinational disaster management initiatives such as the "International Charter, Space and Major Disasters" depend upon the ability of the signatories to engage in the rapid tasking of their respective surveillance satellites. In other words, quickly altering the flight patterns of the surveillance satellites in question so they zoom right over a disaster zone is essential to the success of the mission.



Japanese satellite launched in 2005

> "This could be seen by some as a sensitive undertaking with obvious dual use possibilities which Japan will attempt to handle with great care. And that degree of sensitivity clearly permeates anything that ISRO and JAXA have been given the green light to develop in this instance, even though JAXA has no national security mission," said Gatling.

When, in early November, the Japanese press revealed that Japan has begun to explore the possible future launch of an early warning satellite which can detect the launch of enemy ballistic missiles,
according to a draft plan obtained by The Yomiuri Shimbun, the joint declaration was not even mentioned. Among other things, this draft plan promotes the use of rockets and satellites for defense purposes and endorses the need to examine the feasibility of deploying a new satellite which can perform BMD-oriented security and crisis management or disaster monitoring roles
simultaneously.

The draft plan is scheduled for final review in late November, and while it may not neatly address whatever ISRO and JAXA have elected to pursue, Beijing will be hard pressed to dismiss what could easily become a convenient addendum to the Joint Declaration.

India wants to increase satellite surveillance of all Chinese military activities, particularly along the Chinese border with India. On November 1, for example, the Times of India reported that during the
most recent Indian Army commanders' conference, "one of the main agenda items" included a discussion of the need to dig tunnels in forward areas including along the Chinese border with "fooling enemy satellites from gauging the exact troop positions and their strength in forward areas" identified as one of the key objectives.

> "China has resorted to tunneling on a large-scale along the LAC [Line of Actual Control] especially in the Tibetan Autonomous Region," one senior officer at the conference told the Times. Proponents of increased Japanese government budgetary support look to exploit every opportunity to stress the commercial and strategic importance of the Japanese space program, and in this case, China's manned spaceflight program - not tunnels - serves an important purpose.

"The rapid advances in space by China - and India - clearly caught the attention of the Japanese who saw themselves as the leader in space in the region a decade ago," said Gatling.

Dr Joan Johnson-Freese, chair of the Department of National Security Studies at the US Naval War College, does not believe the Japan-India space relationship is picking up steam. "The consensus-driven decision making process used in Japan means that pretty much everything moves at a glacial pace," said Johnson-Freese. She prefers to take the language in the Joint Declaration at face value.

> "Disaster management efforts in the Pacific Rim region have been under discussion for a long time, and this is part of the culmination of those talks. It is one of the few areas where everyone in the region agrees that concerted efforts are required," said Johnson-Freese, adding that she has not heard of any serious concerns from China over Japan and India working together on disaster management.

Kulacki also recalls the tone and spirit of the proceedings of the International Lunar Exploration Working Group (ILEWG) conference in Beijing in 2006, which issued a declaration on cooperation called the ILEWG Beijing Declaration.

"All sides seemed cordial, well-acquainted and anxious to pursue joint projects. I do not sense any tension among the space professionals of these three countries, who understand and are anxious to reap the benefits of joint efforts," said Kulacki.

Johnson-Freese views things a bit differently, and labels the three parties as "cautiously prudent". "They will pursue joint projects when it is win-win," said Johnson-Freese. Here she adds weight, albeit indirectly, to the argument that India and Japan are very much on the same page, and probably agree that a merger of their space activities gradually over time may offer a distinct strategic edge.

Johnson-Freese and Kulacki also clearly disagree over China's leadership role in the Asian space race. "China is not anxious to be seen as a leader and does not see itself as a leader. China feels it is far behind most advanced spacefaring nations," said Kulacki.

> "They are also focused on their own objectives and their own needs. While they would welcome the opportunity to be a competitive commercial space player, especially in the international launch services market where they have a strong advantage, they are focused on longstanding goals first set back in the mid-1980s and revised only marginally since then."
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> "China very much wants to be seen as both the leader of space efforts in Asia, and for developing nations. They are using their manned program to reap all the prestige awards it renders - which are considerable, if only in perceptions created - including that it is beating the US," said Johnson-Freese.

"By virtue of their success in manned space - and the worldwide attention that it brings them - there is certainly the perception that China is the regional technology leader. While that is a function more of political will than technical capability, perception very quickly becomes the reality from which people base opinions and actions." Interestingly, news of Japan's draft plan involving the possible launch of an early warning satellite coincided with the arrival in Tokyo of Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov. He warned Japan and the rest of Asia about the dangers of the rampant missile technology proliferation now underway in the region and an emerging "confrontational atmosphere" stemming from such things as Japan's AEGIS BMD deployment.

Of course, Lavrov said nothing about Russia's important role in support of South Korea's entry into the Asian space race or about how Russia has been a major backer of the Indian aerospace sector. In fact, the Russian space agency is actively engaged in ISRO's Chandrayaan-2 project, supplying ISRO with its lunar lander and jointly developing a lunar rover.

China's recent announcement that it would provide Pakistan with a new communications satellite early in the next decade - adding yet another space asset to the fast-growing Asian "dual use" roster - no doubt provides India with further justification for pursuing closer ties in space with Japan.

China, at the same time, must not enjoy the news that numerous NASA scientists are apparently eager and poised to join the ranks of ISRO, a timely shift in highly specialized talent that came to light in the days immediately following the successful launch of India's new moon probe, Chandrayaan-1.

> "I doubt China is the only factor, but it is one factor [in India-Japan joint space activity]. Other factors could be desires to increase regional relations and influence. We are seeing more and more cooperation in space, sometimes along traditional relationships like US and Europe, and sometimes along nontraditional ones like Japan and India," said Weedon.

The success of the International Space Station program, and the fact that countries are looking for new ways to cope with the huge costs of operating in space during this steep global economic downturn, are making international cooperation a more attractive and more acceptable option, he said.

Peter J Brown is a satellite journalist who works from Maine.

This article appeared at Asia Times on November 12, 2008. Posted at Japan Focus on November 24, 2008.

Recommended citation: Peter J Brown, "China Looks Beyond India-Japan Space Alliance to the US Connection," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 48-1-08, November 24, 2008.

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