

Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

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Sino-Russo Space Alliance: Implications on Geopolitical Realignments, US Foreign Policy and Kenya Space Agency

In today's **GLOCEPS Daily Influential Brief**, our Resident Research Fellow, Janet Kiguru, analyses the simmering rivalry between China and US in space exploration and its impact on global realignments and Kenya's space ambitions. Find out if China's long walk to cosmos is finally paying off and whether things are soon falling apart in US Space hegemony. Will Kenya lose or gain from the spoils? (**Dr. K.O. Asembo, Editor-in-Chief**)

Janet Kiguru

Abstract

The China-Russia Memorandum of Understanding to build a joint International Lunar Scientific Research Station (ILRS) is bound to revive space rivalry between the United States (US), on one hand, and China and Russia, on the other. The growing hostility between US and the two countries appears to have lifted the conflict into space. The predominantly communist powers have combined Russia's technology and space prowess with China's economic power with the aim of conquering cosmos. Russia's space technology support has enabled China to successfully launch the first

ever soft landing on the far side of the moon. This prepares China to take lead in space control as she finalizes her national space station program that will rule the heavens after the soon-to-be decommissioned International Space Station (ISS). Consequently, other countries are likely to look up to China in the new era of space colonization, regardless of the advances the US and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are making in Mars. Within this context, Kenya's space ambition is likely to be trapped in the quagmire. This paper argues that China-Russia space agenda is likely to

affect America's international standing as the hub of cutting edge technology and civilization in space science thereby igniting 'Star Wars', which could benefit or jeopardize Kenya's space programs. The prospects indicate that US Congress may reconsider its decision to reduce the budget of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in a bid to protect US lead in space exploration. The brief recommends that states with extraterrestrial ambitions should take advantage of the rivalry to advance their space agenda.



China's Prototype Space Station Tiangong-1
Photocredit: Wallpaper cave

Introduction

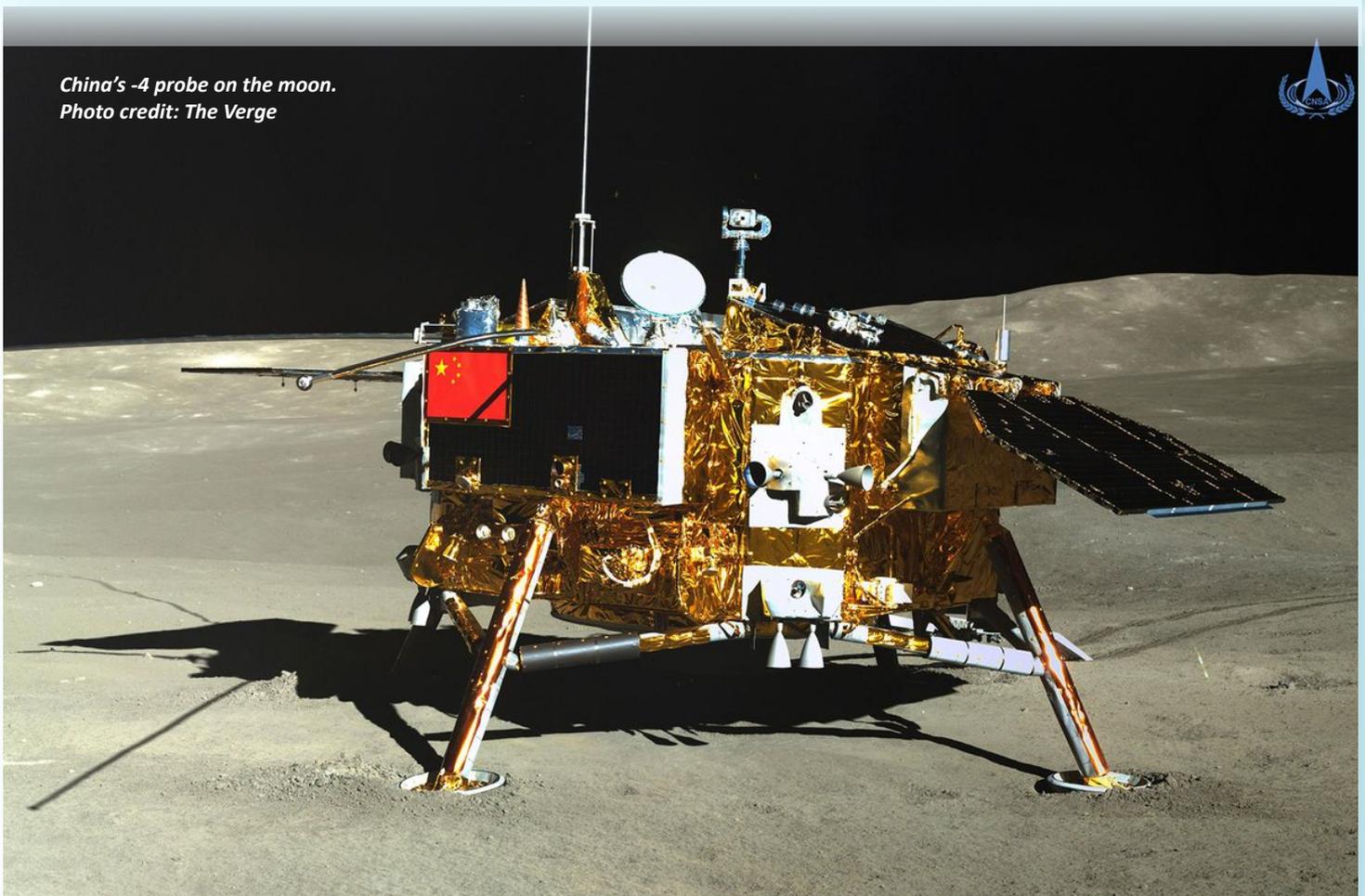
The race to colonize space is bound to be spearheaded by China and Russia in the near future as the US drastically reduces its funding of NASA, amidst increasing hostility against Russia and China. The objective of space colonization is to advance international image, promote technology and civilization thereby increasing a country's stature in the global community.

Great Powers are seeking to colonize space for energy, new territories, natural resources, military defence and as a future habitat for mankind. The March 2021 accord between China and Russia to build an International Lunar Scientific Research Station (ILRS) threatens America's supremacy beyond the earth frontiers. The US has previously maintained leadership in championing the International Space Station in collaboration with Roscosmos (Russia), JAXA (Japan), ESA (Europe), and CSA (Canada).

The strained diplomatic relations between Russia and US have made the former pull out of the nearly 20-year-old International Space Station (ISS) program. The situation is amplified by the fact that the station has continued to rely on obsolete technology characterized by air leaks and other structural issues, hence expensive to maintain.

NASA's budget has also been drastically reduced by US Congress making her dependent on Russia's spacecraft and private entities such as Space X to get her astronauts to the ISS. On the other hand, China has accelerated her plans to build a space station and the core module is set to be launched in 2021. The Station will be 20 times bigger than the ISS, a situation that is bound to threaten America's hegemony in space.

China's -4 probe on the moon.
Photo credit: The Verge



Key Issues

The following key issues remain significant in relation to the simmering US-China-Russia space hostilities and opportunities available for Kenya.

The Geopolitical Space Realignments

China has opened her ILRS ambition to all countries and international partners and the possibility of JAXA, ESA and CSA joining as soon as ISS is decommissioned remains high. China has enhanced her cooperation with other space powers and even shared data and samples from the moon for scientific research.

However, US regulation does not allow NASA to participate in this program. This will technically lock out the US from future space station research programs. The growing realignments have seen Russia further decline to join NASA's Artemis Project meant to land the first woman and next man on moon by 2024. On the other hand, China has partnered with the Belt and Road initiative countries such as Namibia, Kenya, Kiribati and Argentina to advance her space exploration.

The Malindi tracking station in Kenya has particularly worried the US over China's increasing scientific advancement and strategic leverage that will enable her to have a functioning national space station by 2024. States with interests in the 3,000-plus satellites in space will be looking up to China's station for launch of satellites and research.

This will extend China's strategic leverage in whipping cooperating ILRS states into a major pact to advance her foreign policy agenda. The developments will further dent the US dominance in global politics and render America a lone ranger in future space exploration programs.

The Rising Threat to US Space Command

China's rising star in space exploration is likely to threaten the stature of United States Space Command (USSPACECOM), a military agency with a mission to advance and protect US interests in space. The agency was conceived to deter other space powers with ambitions that could threaten US dominance in space.

The Biden administration has escalated the fight against China and Russia, seeing them as a threat to American space and technological power. The administration appears to be keen on using space exploration to unify America given that space achievements have historically been the source of pride and patriotism. In fact, the US needs to redeem herself since her 'scientific prowess' has not dominated the battle against COVID-19. This will involve reconsidering NASA budget.

China appears to be getting ready for a protracted war in space for purposes of self-defence. The China National Space Administration (CNSA) is a military agency of the People's Liberation Army. It is heavily funded and has the full backing of the Communist Party of China. Both Russia and China have been actively developing and testing anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons and other strategies to destroy or disable satellites from Earth. Though, China's ASAT test have been globally admonished, China's flexing of her destructive abilities is a tool of deterrence.

The race to command space is likely to derail the US from her economic recovery blueprint which is equally facing sustained threats from China.

Rise of Space Armies

Space powers seeking to exploit extraterrestrial minerals have begun investing in military infrastructure that will be vital in protecting the economic investments that will be put up. The establishment of a permanent lunar station is likely to be perceived as territorial mark and states are likely to start claiming their property rights leading to claims of space sovereignty.

China has been taking advantage of unclear legal regimes and indicated that her sovereignty is key to pursuing her agenda in space exploration. As the era of cooperation comes to an end, she has seen the high likelihood of no democracy in space. The next era of space colonization will be characterized by space armies. This matrix is compounded by the entry of non-state actors and private commercial entities like Space X, that have the intentions of pursuing space tourism.

China sees leadership in space as vital in increasing her economic and military dominance on Earth as she rallies other countries to join her quest. While space is yet to be weaponized, fierce competition may lead to sabotage which could spark military coalitions.

Rise of Modern Chinese Espionage

While China has authoritatively relied on Russian technology to advance her space programs, she has been able to circumvent the US foreign policy and acquire US space technology for her programs. America's foreign policy has pursued an antagonizing approach on China and Russia particularly on transfer of technology and trade.

The policy has denied China access to US technology, and restricted allied-states from accepting China's technology. It has equally prohibited trade of any spacecraft or space asset containing a U.S.-origin component while maintaining that US space technology is subject to U.S. jurisdiction, no matter the location.

China is however, using Hong Kong entities to acquire stakes in U.S. space companies and purchase the restricted space technology, particularly, satellites from Boeing, a US Company. In fact she has been buying American civilian technology and advancing it into militarized technology in the glaring view of the US.

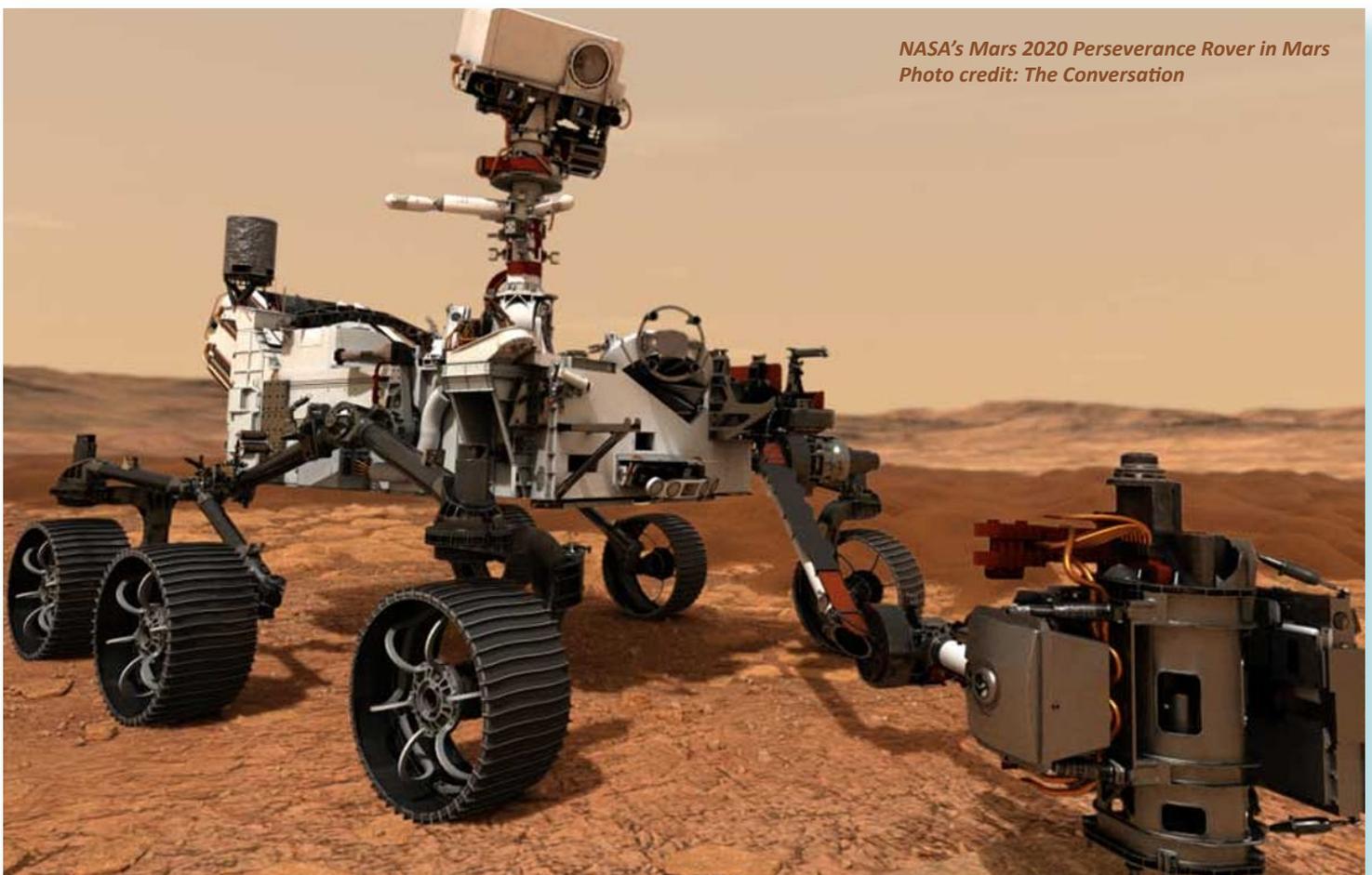
Implications for Kenya Space Agency

The Kenya Space Agency is pursuing cooperation with the Chinese space agency in order to boost her satellite technology. Kenya's Baridi Sana project is the only African co-created project that was chosen to jointly conduct experiments on the China Space Station.

Russia has also renewed her interests in Kenya and Africa at large. With interests to advance to space, Kenya is at cross-roads on which power to align with. The dilemma lies in the fact that Kenya-US relations are at an all-time best with cooperation on anti-terrorism and ongoing USFTA negotiations. On the other hand, Kenya-China relations are also flourishing on trade and space exploration. The possibility of Kenya being cast in the middle of this space competition is inevitable. The Kenya Space agency has also partnered with Italy, Japan and Ukraine who are all allies of the US.

In fact, Kenya's 2018 nanosatellite was launched from the Japanese module on the ISS. Japan and Italy have both partnered with the US on the Artemis while Ukraine got US backing against Russia. But China has also partnered with Italy in co-launching satellites, manned flights and human exploration.

The US is likely to use conditions on the USFTA to limit Kenya-China exchange on science and technology. Kenya has stood up with the US when the latter warned her against buying China's 5G technology. US argues that the technology will allow China to spy on other states and weaken their sovereignty. In the Tech War, Kenya opined that she would pick what is best for her.



*NASA's Mars 2020 Perseverance Rover in Mars
Photo credit: The Conversation*

Conclusion

The establishment of the Sino-Russo space station signifies the emergence of a new space order for the globe. As the US struggles to put her economy in order, the odds are very likely to tilt in favor of China whose robust economy will attract a large number of states to join her ILRS ambition.

There exists the possibility of China financing these states' interests, Kenya included. Therefore, the future space looks bright for China as Russia secedes from the ISS making the aging equipment no longer sustainable for America and her allies.

Recommendations

1. The Kenya Space Agency should partner with China in the Lunar space station program. This will enable Kenya to fast track her space agenda given that China is pursuing inclusivity in space diplomacy.
2. The UN should lead member states in reviewing the outer space treaty to keep up with the advancements in technology, entry of non-state actors and commercial private entities into the space agenda.

Janet Kiguru is GLOCEPS Research Fellow for Diplomacy and Foreign Policy Pillar. She has previous experience in research and teaching at the university level. Her particular areas of expertise include international development, regional integration, bilateral relations, multilateral relations, and diplomatic strategy. Janet is currently a PhD candidate at the United States International University-Africa. She holds a Master's degree in Development Studies and a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Political Science from the University of Nairobi.



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