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July 6, 2010

### Leroy Chiao on Working With the Chinese

Last week the Obama White House released its [National Space Policy](#), a document put forward by every administration since Eisenhower's. The report gives each president a chance to articulate his vision for the nation's space activities.

The new plan is notable in its call for international cooperation, a sharp departure from the Bush Administration's reliance on an all-U.S. philosophy for most space activities. The new plan also reiterates Obama's intent for commercial companies, such as Orbital Sciences and Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX), to play a larger role in launching cargo and eventually crew to low Earth orbit.

Dr. Leroy Chiao, a veteran NASA astronaut with three shuttle flights on his resume—as well as a Soyuz launch and reentry and a half-year stint as the commander of the International Space Station (ISS)—has a unique perspective on international cooperation. A first-generation Chinese American, Chiao speaks Mandarin and Russian. In January 1996, during STS-72, his second space flight, Chiao became the first Asian-American to spacewalk (he's performed six). Beginning with his Soyuz launch to the ISS in October 2004, he became the first Asian-American to command a space mission, Expedition 10. In September 2006 he became the first American to tour China's Astronaut Research and Training Center near Beijing, where he chatted in Mandarin over lunch with Yang Liwei, China's first astronaut, and Fei Junlong, commander of the country's second space flight, a two-man mission. Chiao wrote about the visit for *Air & Space*. Today he's an executive vice-president and a director at Excalibur Almaz, a private manned space flight company.



Leroy Chiao offers the universal salute at the Baikonur Cosmodrome on October 5, 2004, as he heads for

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a dress rehearsal in the Soyuz capsule that would carry him nine days later to the ISS.

“I think this [new White House] policy is a fresh look, with significant changes in paradigm,” says Chiao by email, while he’s traveling in Russia and Europe. “The call for enhanced international cooperation is a total turnaround from the last policy, and the call for commercial space development is also exciting and new. I agree with both new directions.”

Though he left NASA in 2005, Chiao still keeps informed about space policy. As a member of the 2009 Review of Human Space Flight Plans Committee headed by Norman Augustine, he took a hard look at where U.S. manned space flight is headed, including opportunities for international partnership. Chiao welcomes the prospect of U.S.-Chinese cooperation in space. (Despite recent reports that the Russians had invited the Chinese to become a partner on the ISS program, NASA later said it wasn’t true.) “I think the better idea is for the U.S. to work with China to develop SZ [the Shenzhou spacecraft] as an alternative crew vehicle to ISS, to dock with the U.S. segment,” he says. “This would be complimentary to commercial efforts, and probably would arrive at ISS earlier. I think it could follow the model of the Russian cooperation. We could have an astronaut exchange before the end of the shuttle program, although the time [to do that] would be now. In this scenario, an American astronaut would fly on Shenzhou, to watch over the RNDZ [rendezvous] and docking procedure with the ISS.”

He admits that there would be hurdles, as the Chinese program is run by the military, and is more secretive than civilian space agencies like NASA or ESA. “Certainly, we need a level of transparency to work together,” says Chiao. “China has been getting better about it over time, consistent with their increasing openness about wanting to work with other space agencies.” Hurdles exist here at home, too, especially adherence to ITAR (International Traffic in Arms Regulations) that govern the export of sensitive technology. That extends to private companies including the one where he now works.

“All U.S. companies and citizens must comply with ITAR,” he says. “So private companies would be no more free [than NASA] to work with China.” His own company, Excalibur Almaz, “would love to work with China, to leverage their technology and capabilities,” says Chiao. “We are developing relationships with them now, to be ready for the day when such cooperation is allowed. In the meantime, we are very careful to stay within the bounds of the laws of both countries.”

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