



Leroy Chiao -- a former NASA astronaut -- was the first American allowed inside the facilities of China's fledgling space agency. Since his visit, Chiao thinks leaving China out of U.S. space plans is a bad idea. Credit: NASA



On September 27, 2008, China completed its first spacewalk. Although short at 18 minutes (NASA and Russian spacewalks can last eight hours), the excursion demonstrated China's steady progress in manned spaceflight. Credit: CNSA

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The scoop: *China is blazing its way into space and shows no signs of slowing down, yet NASA hardly acknowledges the space-faring nation. Former NASA astronaut Leroy Chiao explains why the U.S. space agency should cooperate with China.*

In September 2003, Yang Liwei became the first Chinese National Space Administration astronaut to launch into space. The event marked China's historic entrance into the manned space game -- only the third nation in the world to have that capability. And China recently accomplished another milestone: Astronaut Zhai Zhigang stepped into the vacuum of space in September 2008 to complete the nation's [first spacewalk](#).

As the first American allowed to visit the Astronaut Center of China in September 2006, I saw the program's technological sophistication first-hand. After spending a day with Yang Liwei and Fei Junlong, commander of China's second space mission (Shenzhou 6), it became apparent to me that the Chinese didn't lack technology and sophistication. What they lacked was operational experience -- something that only comes with time.

Still, the steady pace of [China's manned space program](#) is impressive. Some might say that they've been conservative (their first spacewalk lasted only about eighteen minutes, and the astronauts never disconnected their electrical umbilicals), but I see it as a series of well-planned quantum steps. And though China has publicly announced their desire to join the International Space Station (ISS) program on at least two occasions, they have been rebuffed.

In 2003, NASA said that the Chinese program was too far behind technologically and [lacked sophistication](#). In 2007, NASA simply ignored them. When China held its first international manned space conference in 2007 in Beijing, I was the lone American astronaut present. Except for a few people who could sign their own travel orders, NASA completely ignored the Russian, European, Japanese, Canadian and Chinese assembly of astronauts, cosmonauts and space specialists.

What do we make, then, of NASA's [recent meetups with China](#)?

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These gatherings were designed to discuss collaborating on Earth and space science endeavors. Such contact is a good step, but it is preliminary, low-profile and low-risk. At this point, it seems to be mostly window dressing -- a far cry from a bolder move of cooperating in manned space flight.

Today NASA faces enormous challenges, and the need to cooperate looms on the space agency's horizon.

NASA's Constellation program to return people to the moon has encountered a steady stream of technical and budgetary difficulties, and it's not at all clear what course the new presidential administration will chart early next year. The [space shuttle](#) will most likely be retired in late 2010, leaving the United States with no capability of its own to launch astronauts into space. We will be entirely dependent on foreign partners to do so. Currently, only [Russia](#) is such a partner.

Could China be the second? It certainly makes sense. Space is a good place to start a policy shift, as the United States showed with Russia in the early 1990s.

At that time I didn't see the point of cooperating with a former enemy and objected to using our nation's space program as a foreign policy tool. I also thought that the Russians were technologically backward. Having grown up during the Cold War, I "knew" these things to be true. It wasn't until I started training as a space station crew member that I came to respect the Russians, their technology and their culture. I soon saw the benefits of using U.S. assets and programs to enhance political friendship.

Some will argue that cooperation in space with [China](#) would benefit their weapons -- but nothing could be farther from the truth. Nothing in such a cooperative effort would make a ballistic missile more accurate or a nuclear warhead more powerful. In fact, trying to isolate China might motivate them to further develop such technologies.

And having been rebuffed by the United States on the space station program, the nation recently announced plans for a space station of their own. In order to loft it into orbit, China is developing the Long March 5 rocket -- a true heavy-lift launcher and the most advanced Chinese rocket ever. If the U.S. had cooperated with China earlier on the ISS, would they have committed their resources to making this 800-metric-ton rocket which, by the way, could also lift huge nuclear warheads?

China is emerging as a true world power, both economically and technologically. Does it make more sense for the United States to engage the Chinese, or keep them at arm's length?

I believe the answer is obvious. It is important to take the global view because isolationism has long been obsolete. The U.S. should find mutually beneficial areas such as space to cooperate in, and turn our Chinese adversary into a friend.

Leroy Chiao served as a NASA astronaut from 1990 - 2005, during which time he flew four space missions, served as the commander of Expedition 10, and logged nearly 230 days in orbit. Chiao is the first Chinese-American to become a professional astronaut, spacewalker and mission commander. The views expressed are the author's alone and do not represent the official position of the Discovery Channel.

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