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NASA Enlists Private Space Industry to Break Reliance on Russian Rockets

By Matthew Bodner

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SpaceX's Dragon V2 spacecraft, one of the prime contenders for the NASA contract at its unveiling ceremony in May 2014.

Within weeks, NASA is expected to award a multibillion-dollar contract for the development of spacecraft by private U.S. space companies, severing the agency's dependence on Russia's Soyuz rocket for transporting astronauts to the International Space Station, or ISS.

Since NASA retired its fleet of space shuttles in 2011, the Russian Soyuz rocket has been the only means of transporting American astronauts to ISS — a dependency that has come into sharp focus as tensions flare over the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Under its current contract, NASA pays Russia $62.7 million a seat for transport to ISS, a $150 billion, 15 nation project largely co-managed by the U.S. and Russia. NASA recently signed a new contract for 2016-2017 at a price of $70 million a seat aboard the Soyuz.

In a drive to free NASA's budget and efforts from building its own vehicle to reach the space station, U.S. President Barack Obama's administration in 2009 began pushing the agency to seed the budding private space sector with funding to build its own vehicles.

Known as the Commercial Crew Program, the contest has been narrowed down to three contenders: SpaceX, Sierra Nevada and Boeing, who are now vying for funding to complete development of their vehicles.

Outsourcing to private companies may cut costs significantly. One of the leading contenders for the NASA contract, SpaceX, says that it can carry astronauts to space for $20 million a seat.

The program is now about to enter a critical phase. In late August or early September, NASA will distribute a new round of funding to complete the final stages of development for one or more of the vehicles. It is not yet known how much will be granted, or to whom, but there is a strong chance all three will receive funding to continue their work.

Upon completion of the commercial crew program, NASA will rent the winners' services rather than buying their vehicles, ostensibly opening an entirely new segment of the commercial space market in which foreign governments or private citizens and organizations could buy rides into space as well.

However, NASA officials told The Moscow Times that they do not expect the program to spell an end to U.S. astronauts flying on Soyuz. One of the cornerstones of U.S.-Russia space partnership has been the sharing of space transportation capabilities, with both Russian cosmonauts and U.S. astronauts flying aboard each others' spacecraft over the past two decades.

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