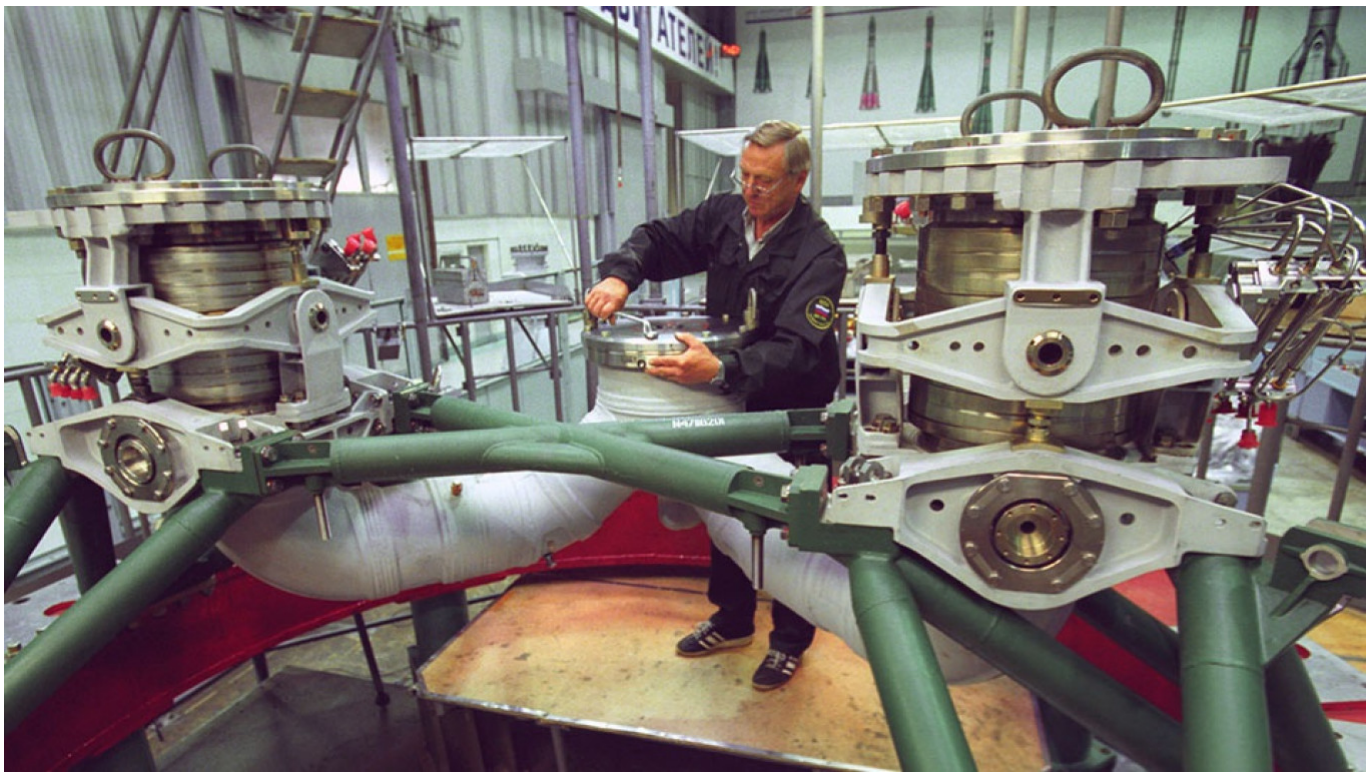
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U.S. Space Contractor Signs Deal to Continue Buying Russian Rocket Engines

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RD-180 engines (Yuri Mashkov / TASS)

Russia has signed a deal to sell previously banned space rocket engines to the United States at a time of heightened tensions between the two countries.

U.S. lawmakers banned the use of the Russian engines for military and spy satellite launches after Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014. The ban was partially lifted due to the United Launch Alliance (ULA) space contractor's reliance on the Russian-built engine for lifting its rockets into space.

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"We signed a contract where we will supply six more RD-180 engines to our partners in 2020," the head of Russia's Energomash enginemaker, Igor Arbuzov, told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency on Tuesday.

Following a NASA and Air Force quality compliance audit in 2017, Arbuzov said ULA planned to test-launch its Atlas V rocket equipped with the Russian engine this November, with manned flights scheduled for February 2019.

The Kommersant business daily reported in 2017 that ULA and Energomash had been engaged in secret talks for over a year to extend the sales of the RD-180 engines. The two companies had previously signed contracts for 22 engines to be delivered in 2017-2018.

On Tuesday, Kommersant reported that Russia's Roscosmos federal space agency had to convince the Defense Ministry and Federation Council to approve the engine sales. The agency argued that revenues from the sale could be used to fund the development of two other advanced rocket engines.

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