

FEATURE

China could leave US lost in space

China has excluded the US from a list of international partners shortlisted to collaborate with its Tiangong space station

by Frank Chen

June 25, 2021

https://asiatimes.com/2021/06/china-could-leave-us-lost-in-space/?mc_cid=dfa142a19f&mc_eid=049d5e1b07



China could box US out of its new space station. Image: Facebook

Will China welcome American guests to its Tiangong space station when in just a few years it will be the only such habitable artificial satellite in operation?

Social media and some nationalistic papers are buzzing with such speculation after last Thursday's lift-off that sent Chinese astronauts Nie Haisheng, Liu Boming and Tang Hongbo into the Tianhe, the core part of the Tiangong that is taking shape in low Earth orbit.

Beijing's decade-long mission to build its own space station as a companion of the US-led International Space Station (ISS) is shaping up well and quickly.

State media propaganda about the Tiangong is set to continue since the mission of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force major generals-turned-taikonauts is more than a round trip.

Rather, their three-month sojourn in the craft, whose name refers to a celestial palace, will see a flurry of experiments and televised sky-earth communication, culminating in at least two high-stakes spacewalks.

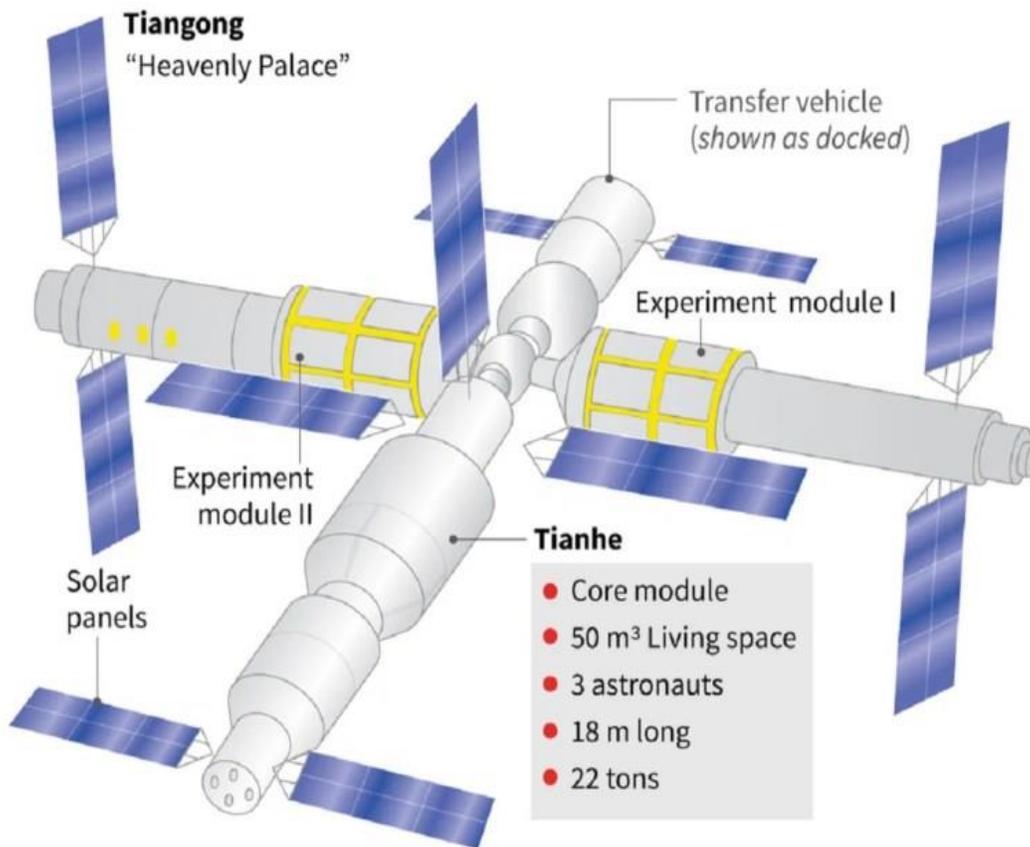
Chinese papers say the nation's space station launching and building spree since 2021, with two more send-offs and expeditions

scheduled for the rest of the year, will gather pace even further in the waning years of the ISS.

They say taikonauts in the Tiangong may soon wave off their foreign peers in around 2025 as the sun is setting on the "crumbling ISS." Cracks are also appearing in the multinational cooperation, with Russia opting out once its operation contact for the ISS expires in 2024.

China's plan to build a space station

- ▶ 11 launches are scheduled to deliver all the planned modules
- ▶ First astronauts to board core module in orbit will visit in June 2021
- ▶ Space station expected to be **operational by 2022**



Weight
More than 90 tons
(About a quarter of the size of the International Space Station)

Lifespan
Around 15 years

Position
Low orbit at between 400 and 450 km above Earth

Source: China State Media/Space.com/spacenews.com





Chinese President Xi Jinping talks to the trio of taikonauts via a video link after they entered the Tiangong last week. Photo: Xinhua

China has assured Russia of its continued presence in space, with the latter leading a pack of selected countries to embrace the Tiangong after the ISS's looming decommissioning.

Beijing's other de facto allies such as Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates as well as regional rivals India and Japan and Western powers like Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium and the European Space Agency are all among the shortlisted partners to develop

payloads for nine international projects and experiments to be conducted in the Tiangong, according to Xinhua.

The US is glaringly missing from the list of partners.

Zhou Jianping, the chief designer of China's manned space programs and a deputy director of the National Space Administration (NSA), told state broadcaster China Central



A peep inside the core module of China's Tiangong space station. Photo: CCTV screengrab

Television in an [interview](#) in June 2019 that a US university had submitted its proposal to the NSA yet he shot it down after assessment by experts found it had “little scientific value.”

Zhou did not specify at the time which American institution had sought to participate.

Now, with the taikonaut trio making steady headway 400 kilometers above sea level one week into their mission, the Global Times has [taken a dig](#) at the China Exclusion Policy, aka the Wolf Amendment.

This was introduced by the Barack Obama administration in 2011 to build an iron curtain in space to shut China – then an ascendant new entrant sketching out its space station program – out of NASA’s government-funded cooperation with foreign countries or entities.

With scathing sarcasm, the state-backed tabloid noted China should feel “indebted” to the US whose containment policy “lent the crucial lift” for China’s meteoric rise as self-reliance had paid off well for its space program over the past decade.

It said the US would be “on another planet” if it thought its continued exclusion could hold back China’s advance, when multiple programs were well underway to one day pip the US in the new space race.

On top of the Tiangong, China is also juggling budgets, resources and launch schedules for its lunar and Mars explorations, with multiple Chinese probes charting new territories on both celestial bodies.

The newspaper hinted that China should take a page out of America’s playbook and impose a “US Exclusion Policy” on NASA.

Still, when asked if Beijing would seek to leave the US in the cold when many countries have [come on board](#) its Tiangong program, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian [said](#) last week that Beijing would look forward to welcoming foreign guests to the

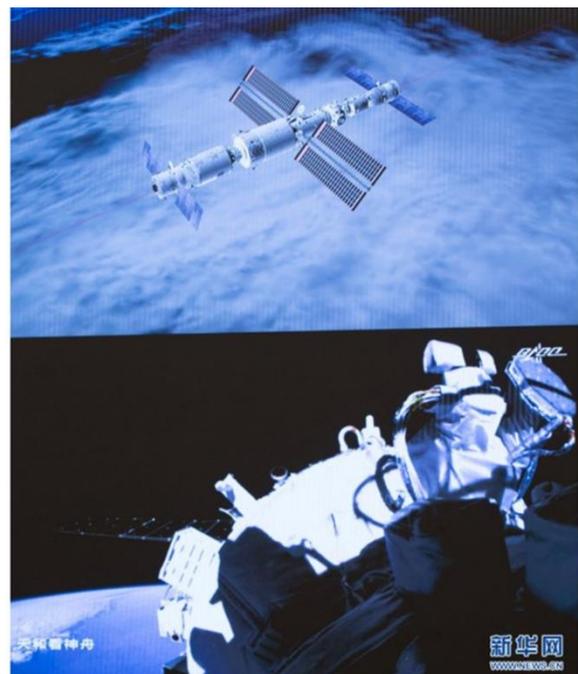
Tiangong, especially when it became the only space station in operation.

Beijing appears to be leaving the door open for the US after NASA chief Bill Nelson’s congratulations on the Tiangong’s head start. Yet concern aired by US Space Force commander James Dickinson during a congressional hearing last month exposed America’s unease about China’s advances.

Dickinson said the Tiangong’s powerful, 10-meter robotic arm, among other key parts and technologies, could be readily militarized to grab and attack American satellites, probes and other spacecraft if hostilities broke out between the rival powers.

Other than its core role in space shuttle rendezvous missions, Tiangong’s robotic arm, according to chief designer Zhou, can capture space debris to protect the space lab and is capable of lifting objects weighing up to 20 tonnes.

Eric Mer, an associate professor of international relations at Peking University, told Asia Times that the US may be eager to join the



The Tiangong and Shenzhou space shuttle as seen in live video feeds during their docking on June 17. Photo: Xinhua

Tiangong program and even send its people to visit the Chinese space station to gain first-hand knowledge of key parts like the robotic arm.

At the same time, he wondered if Beijing was prepared to give the US such an opportunity and be forthcoming about core details of the program, especially when the PLA was heavily involved and when Beijing now possessed what he termed “a trove of new technologies.”

“Beijing’s talk of willingness and openness for international cooperation is not entirely political posturing but such openness may just be for partners like Russia,” said the scholar.

“Is Beijing willing to share with the US key designs and specifications of the sprawling

systems that support the Tiangong as well as related rockets and space shuttles simply for Americans to visit the space station? I don’t think so.

“Beijing may want to apply red tape and dither over a decision if there are overtures from NASA about a courtesy call, but NASA has its own hurdles when the Wolf Amendment is still in place

“Perhaps the US did not envisage the huge progress China has made in the past ten years. The geopolitics and rivalry between the two powers back on earth are playing out in space and American astronauts may be wondering about their fate after the ISS,” he said.