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ASTRONOMY

China's moon aspirations more politics than science

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BY KENNETH HICKS

NASA Administrator Michael Griffin told Congress last month that the next footsteps on the moon could be Chinese, not American. That's one not-so-small step for China, and a wake-up call for Americans.

The Chinese have big plans, starting with the Chang'e-1 probe, an unmanned mission set to do a lunar flyby this year. The probe will take 3-D pictures of the moon and use microwaves to study the moon's surface.

Their next step is to land unmanned rovers on the moon, followed by missions capable of returning lunar rocks to Earth by 2017.

The first Chinese astronaut went into space in 2003. A spacewalk is planned for 2008.

Huang Chunping, a senior space official, told China's top political advisory body last month that landing an astronaut on the moon could be done within 15 years. However, China still needs to greatly improve its rocket thrust before this can be done.

Huang said that a new rocket capable of carrying a 25 ton payload would be ready in seven to eight years.

So should Americans be worried? I think not. From a scientific perspective, the Chinese have little to gain from sending an astronaut to the moon. Much of the science of the moon was done decades ago, either by manned or, more recently, unmanned missions.

Of course, some scientific activities can be done only by humans, but that kind of work is not likely in the short out-and-back mission China plans.

Consider the European Space Agency. It has sent probes to Saturn, and probably could send a person to the moon if desired. From their actions, it appears the Europeans have decided that their money is better spent on science than on political stunts.

What is motivating the Chinese to send a manned mission to the moon? I doubt it would be for the mineral resources, as some news sources have suggested. It is tremendously expensive to bring materials back.

Politically, the Chinese have a lot to gain with a lunar mission. If successful, they will be only the second country to do so.

Now the United States must decide how to react. Will Congress respond rationally or emotionally? I hope the NASA budget will increase, and that science will be kept at the forefront of NASA's budget decisions.

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