

China Takes Off

Before the September 11 attacks, China was the chief concern for many in the foreign policy establishment. The communist country was increasing the size and reach of its missile arsenal, sharing its weapons technology with rogue states like Libya and Iran, and threatening Taiwan. Beijing has increasingly been throwing its weight around, challenging U.S. dominance in the Asia-Pacific region—and the country's push toward technological modernization makes it a potential economic rival to America. The first foreign policy crisis of the current Bush administration was a bitter diplomatic conflict precipitated by the collision of a Chinese fighter and a U.S. Navy spy plane.

China clearly aspires to superpower status, and in October it made a symbolic step in that direction, becoming just the third country to put a man into space. The Chinese government has announced that it intends, before the end of the decade, to send probes to orbit and land on the Moon. More manned missions are in the works, and it is possible that manned missions to the Moon may follow. There has also been talk of a Chinese space station. What are we to make of China's foray into space?

First, we shouldn't feel threatened by China's space program. The U.S. and Russia have sent 431 humans into space; China has only sent one. Even with Russian help, the Chinese are decades behind us in terms of manned spaceflight. While the Chinese will no doubt make rapid progress in space, we have little to fear that, for instance, Red China will make it to the Red Planet before we do.

Second, that said, we ought not scorn China's achievement. While China's space program will have no immediate scientific or economic value, it has boosted the country's status in the eyes of the world; to the Chinese, sending humans into space is a matter of national prestige and pride. And although some analysts have said that manned spaceflight holds no military value, that isn't quite correct: some of the technical advances the Chinese will make in their manned space program will probably translate into skills and capacities useful for space warfare. As America has learned from its own space program, the secondary (and often unanticipated) benefits of building the technology to go to space can be quite great.

Third, we should always be concerned when a cruel and immoral regime makes technological leaps. In authoritarian China, modern communication and information technologies are used to spread propaganda, while the biotechnical revolution is bent toward a new eugenic ideal. We should stay wary of China's intentions in space.

Finally, we should note that, in some ways, the Chinese move into space is long overdue. Ancient China was strikingly advanced in astronomy, engineering, math, medicine, and military technology, as the late sinologist Joseph Needham meticulously chronicled in his massive *Science and Civilization in China*, the last volumes of which are now being published. But the Chinese people became isolated, forgetful, and stagnant for centuries. No more. The slumbering dragon is stirring again.