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Space-faring nations lay groundwork for human, robotic exploration

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By Irene Klotz

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Officials from 32 of the world's space-faring nations concluded a trio of summits on Friday to tackle expanding participation in the International Space Station and planning for eventual human expeditions to Mars.

Fifteen nations collaborated to build the space station, a permanently staffed research complex that flies about 250 miles (about 400 km) above Earth. On Wednesday, the Obama Administration announced its intent to extend station operations to at least 2024, four years beyond when it was slated to be removed from orbit.

"We're very happy to hear about extension," Xu Dazhe, administrator of the China National Space Administration, said Friday at the International Academy of Astronautics conference, one of three global space summits hosted in Washington this week.

"It means that by the time our space station is being built, we would have a companion up there," Xu said, speaking through a translator.

China has a prototype station in orbit and plans to launch the core module of a follow-on outpost in 2018. Two laboratory modules would follow in 2020 and 2022.

Congress has banned the U.S. space agency NASA from direct collaborations or partnerships with China, primarily due to concerns about technology transfer. China does have scientists participating in the station's premier experiment, the Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer particle detector.

The U.S.-Chinese relationship is among the thornier issues facing leaders of 32 space agencies, who also discussed robotic exploration of the solar system, detecting potentially threatening asteroids, expanding commercial space ventures and other initiatives.

In parallel space policy summit, hosted for the first time by the U.S. Department of State, Deputy Secretary William Burns said on Thursday that countries should make space exploration "a shared global priority."

"Despite the many pressures, challenges and urgent priorities facing the United States at home and abroad, our commitment to space exploration is only growing stronger," Burns said.

The conferences also addressed expanding space programs in developing countries as a way to create new business opportunities, as well as serve educational purposes.

"Our emphasis ... is mostly on applications," Seidu Oneilo Mohammed, director general of Nigeria's National Space Research and Development Agency, told reporters at a press conference on Friday.

In addition to more communication satellites, "our concern is feeding our people, creating jobs and eliminating poverty. That relies more and more .. on agricultural management," he said.

Follow-on studies from the conferences are expected to generate specific initiatives in robotic exploration of the solar system, planetary protection, human spaceflight, asteroid mining, space-based solar power systems and other areas. (Reporting by Irene Klotz in Washington; Editing by Lisa Shumaker)



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