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## US willing to pay for Russia's help in space

### WASHINGTON DC

The Bush administration finally moved last week to loosen the legal ties preventing NASA from buying Russian transportation services for the International Space Station.

The 2000 Iran Nonproliferation Act (INA) bars the US space agency from directly purchasing Russian goods or services, including astronaut rides on the Soyuz vehicle (pictured) or cargo deliveries on the Progress capsule. As a principal partner in the space station, Russia has been providing both services free of charge since the station was first occupied in 2000. But that agreement will expire in April 2006. Without access to the Soyuz as an emergency "lifeboat", NASA could only have astronauts on the station when the space shuttle was docked. As NASA administrator Michael Griffin told the House Committee on Science last week, "the United States cannot effectively utilize the space station without our Russian partners."

The INA was intended to put pressure on Russia not to sell missile and weapons technology to Iran. But many experts believe it has been counterproductive. A report on US-Russian space cooperation published by the Washington-based Eisenhower Institute earlier this year concluded that it has hampered positive engagement with Russian space scientists and engineers, and become a

"blanket sanction which affected not only the proliferators but also those complying with nonproliferation standards."

And as NASA's plans for its own space-station rescue vehicle have faltered, the law has become a serious obstacle for the space station. "This was mostly damaging the United States," says University of Maryland physicist and former Russian space official Roald Sagdeev.

### Failed strategy

Last week, Griffin and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote to the House science committee chairman Sherwood Boehlert saying they want to amend the INA — presumably to allow NASA to pay for future Soyuz and Progress flights. The specifics of the amendment, which would have to be passed by Congress, are expected as early as this week.

Sagdeev credits Griffin with solving a dilemma that his predecessor, Sean O'Keefe, had avoided facing. "Finally Mike Griffin did the right thing," he says.

Even science committee member Dana Rohrabacher (Republican, California), a staunch cold warrior who has been one of the principal defenders of the INA, was ready to admit defeat last week.

"It was a worthy effort at the time to make sure that we pressured the Russians not to

participate in the developing of a nuclear facility in Iran," he told a science committee hearing last week. "That strategy has, however, not worked."

The proposed White House amendment will presumably leave most of the INA intact while making an exception for space-station transportation services — an approach that Sagdeev calls "the victory of common sense over ideology".

That would solve an embarrassing problem for NASA, but will not necessarily signal closer ties between the United States and Russia in space. Indeed, Griffin sent mixed messages on that topic last week. "Among the best things to have come from our space programme over the last 15 years is the space cooperation that we've enjoyed with Russia," he told the committee. Later, however, he listed Russia as one of NASA's main competitors in space, and said, "My goal is to see to it that America is always in the lead in that competition. That matters greatly to me."

Sagdeev says Griffin's view of Russia as a competitor is misguided, given that country's "miserable space budget". But he adds that cooperation with Europe is now a higher priority for the Russian space programme than cooperation with the United States. ■

**Tony Reichardt**