

## **Losing control**

**Our position: The space program's gap until next vehicle is way too long.**

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It's never a good idea to depend on an unreliable or unfriendly driver for rides. But that's the predicament that America's space program could be facing.

Between the retirement of the space shuttle and the first launch of NASA's next manned program a gap that could stretch to five years or more -- U.S. astronauts will have to rely on Russian vehicles to reach space and the international space station. The United States has invested tens of billions of dollars in the station.

The United States and Russia have enjoyed a productive partnership in space. But other areas of their relationship that used to be solid are beginning to crumble under the increasingly belligerent and authoritarian rule of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Mr. Putin, for example, recently threatened to target a U.S. missile-defense system in Europe with Russian missiles. He has warned that Russia may pull out of a 1987 treaty with the United States that banned medium-range missiles.

Mr. Putin has been using Russia's vast energy supplies as an economic and political weapon abroad as he centralizes his power at home. And though term limited as president, he has put himself in a position to maintain his grip on power as prime minister.

After NASA grounds shuttles in 2010, U.S. astronauts will have no option but Russian space vehicles until the Constellation program is ready to get off the ground. Shortfalls in NASA's budget, now \$17.3 billion a year, have pushed back the program's first launch to March 2015. Putting Mr. Putin in the pilot's seat that long could lead him to jack up the price for U.S. access to space, or use it as a bargaining chip in other disputes. A further deterioration in relations could ground U.S. astronauts.

At a Senate hearing chaired by Florida Democrat Bill Nelson, NASA officials said the agency could move up Constellation's first launch to September 2013 with another \$2 billion over three years. But other lawmakers are reluctant to make that investment.

Meanwhile, Congress is poised to approve a bill that would dump tens of billions of dollars into subsidies for farms that don't need them. Go figure. Narrowing the gap between the shuttle and Constellation programs also would make it easier for NASA to hold on to its skilled work force, including thousands on Florida's Space Coast. It would help the United States keep its lead in space exploration, and the related science and technology that drive economic growth.

Congress needs to come up with the funding NASA needs, ideally through other spending cuts or tweaks to the tax code. It's a small fraction of the federal budget that would make a big difference for the nation's space program, economy and security. It's not prudent to depend on Vladimir Putin's Russia any longer than necessary.