

NASA and China Should Work Together, Apollo Moonwalker Says

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A replica of the 75-foot Mercury Redstone rocket stands in the background as astronauts Edwin Buzz Aldrin, left, and Ken Bowersox share a moment in July (2003) after the opening of an New York exhibit commemorating the 100 year anniversary of the Wright brothers' first flight. (AP Photo/Ed Bailey)

Apollo moonwalker Buzz Aldrin advises NASA to embrace China's emerging expertise in the human spaceflight arena as the Chinese prepare for a piloted launch that could occur next week.

"We'd learn a little bit more about China's space plans if we extended a hand of welcome," said Aldrin, part of the Apollo 11 lunar expedition crew, with Neil Armstrong and Michael Collins, that carried out the first landing mission of humans on the Moon in July 1969.

The United States should consider rolling out the welcome mat for Chinese space flyers at the International Space Station, Aldrin says. Furthermore, it seems feasible that the Chinese may well have plans to circumnavigate the Moon in the not too distant future.

"What does NASA have to lose? I think it can be a win-win," the former astronaut told *SPACE.com*, adding the caveat that NASA should learn from past negotiating examples with the Russians and don't get beholden to anybody "ever, ever, ever again."

The liftoff of China's piloted Shenzhou 5 spaceship is expected shortly -- perhaps Oct. 15. A successful piloted Shenzhou sendoff and safe return to Earth would put China in a small clique of spacefaring nations. It would become the third country able to independently boost humans into Earth orbit, following the former Soviet Union in April 1961 and the United States in February 1962.

NASA's chief Sean O'Keefe sees the impending launch as "extremely historic. We wish

them well," O'Keefe said, "and hope and pray for a successful mission and, more importantly, a safe and successful return to Earth."

Shenzhou: Lifeboat for ISS?

"I don't think we need to have a knee-jerk reaction," Aldrin said. "I think we calmly welcome them into the orbital flight regime. We should offer to work out some mutually attractive means of advancing both of our interests."

Aldrin said the United States could engage the Chinese in supplying Shenzhou spacecraft in 2006 as a lifeboat for the International Space Station (ISS). Presently, U.S.-purchased Russian Soyuz vehicles serve in this capacity.

The Chinese could make for good module-mates at the ISS, Aldrin said.

Given China's burgeoning human spaceflight effort, Aldrin looks through a visionary viewport as to where the Chinese might be headed. He said that the multi-section Shenzhou craft's design is novel. He points to the Chinese spacecraft's forward-mounted orbital module that remains circling Earth for months, long after the crew-carrying module reenters.

That segment, sporting its own solar panels and maneuvering rockets, is seemingly a building block for their own space station, Aldrin said. "It would dock very nicely with the ISS, so I understand," he said.

Lessons of Apollo

Aldrin said that China could well be eyeing a future piloted circumlunar flight of the Moon utilizing their Shenzhou spaceship. Such a mission would propel a crew outward into space, round the Moon without landing, and head back to Earth.

In 1968, Apollo 8 astronauts orbited the Moon 10 times before heading home. It was the first flight to take men to the vicinity of the Moon.

The astronauts on the ill-fated Apollo 13 mission in 1970, on the other hand, had to whisk around the Moon on a free return trajectory after their lunar landing was aborted. En route to their lunar destination, an oxygen tank in the Apollo's Service Module exploded, forcing the crew to abandon a planned touchdown on the Moon.

Aldrin pointed out that from 1968 into late 1970 the former Soviet Union flew a series of robotic Zond spacecraft on circumlunar trajectories. Biological specimens were flown on several of the lunar probes, with science data and imagery of the Moon also collected. Although a number of Zond flights checked out equipment and procedures to enable a Soviet-style lunar landing of cosmonauts, such an undertaking was derailed by booster problems and politics of the times.

Could China draw upon the lessons of Apollo to reach for the Moon?

"Why not?" Aldrin concluded. "It's not secret, nor is it classified. It is open to the world."