

USIA Office of Research Analysis

IMPACT OF US AND SOVIET SPACE PROGRAMS ON WORLD OPINION

A Summary Assessment

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1. Awareness: Awareness of US and Soviet space activities, though still high in general, appears to have declined since the days following the launching of the first sputnik. The dramatic appeal of that event generated a breadth of interest rarely paralleled; while subsequent events have continued to attract wide attention, both coverage and comment, particularly the latter, have fallen off substantially.

2. The Nature of Coverage: The nature of coverage, as well as its extent, appears to have changed from the days of the first space efforts. The tendency to sensationalism has modified, and reporting is more sober and more factual. This seems to stem in large measure from the fact that the novelty of space ventures has begun to wear thin, and in part from the fact that audiences are increasingly sophisticated, and fewer projects are such sharply pioneering and unprecedented efforts. As audiences and commentators have begun to acquire sophistication and more informed bases for judgment and responses, implications have been more complexly seen, assessments have been less gross and sweeping, and reactions more qualified. Along with the increase in general sophistication has gone a tendency to discuss events with greater detachment and a marked awareness of their propaganda effects, and even their assumed propaganda intentions.

3. Military Implications: Reaction to space developments, from all audiences, shows a clear tendency to equate achievements in this field with military power. Although thinking about the military implications of space experiments is not in general very precisely or elaborately developed, concern with the military implications of space activities is prominent. While there is some interest in peaceful potential, this tends to be subordinate and unspecified.

4. Effects of Military Linkage: Two reactions flow directly from the widespread conviction that space projects are for the present and for the immediate future essentially military exercises:

- The view that achievements in space science and technology may bring or have brought vital changes in the relative balance of military power between East and West;
- Widespread concern over the implications of an unchecked space-race between the US and the USSR (third power² issues are not felt to be material), and widespread stress on the need for international agreements, controls, or restrictions that would limit the dangers felt to stem from such a race.

5. The Competitive Aspect: Space activities, and especially new ventures, are very generally seen within the framework of US-USSR competition. Comparative and competitive aspects are stressed in comment and press treatment, and the concept of a space-race appears to be almost automatically injected into responses.

6. Involvement and Non-Involvement: Although the dramatic aspects of space ventures continue to have strong appeal to popular imagination, reaching as almost no developments have both illiterate and literate audiences, there is a feeling in some areas that this conquest of the cosmos will not have any immediate practical consequences for them. This feeling may explain in part the lessening of recent interest in the subject and the tendency to dwell upon the military implications. At the same time, a contrary tendency is discernible, for example, in the whole area of Southeast Asia, where uneasiness has increased about the likelihood that an East-West conflict would inevitably involve them, given the new dimensions that space developments have given to modern weapons. Soviet propaganda and diplomacy have sought

assiduously to cultivate this uneasiness among Western allies, especially among those harboring US bases. The effects of this campaign are difficult to assess, since they have called forth both expressions of uneasiness and neutralist sentiment, and at the same time have led to a certain amount of extravagant welcoming of US space successes in the press of areas dependent upon US military power.

7. The Changed Soviet Image: The most significant and enduring result, for world public opinion, of the launching of the first earth satellite by the USSR was a revolutionary revision of estimates of Soviet power and standing. Prior to the launching of Sputnik I there was very general belief that the Soviet Union was a long way from offering a serious challenge to the US lead in science, technology, and productive power. Sputnik and subsequent Soviet space achievements appeared as a dramatic demonstration that the USSR was able to challenge the US successfully in an endeavor where US pre-eminence had been widely taken for granted. Sputnik worked a major modification in the world image of the USSR; at one stride it appeared to close the gap between the US and the USSR, in terms of relative power, and gave new dimensions and new formidableness to that power, a fact which the USSR has vigorously exploited in its propaganda and diplomacy, with greatly enhanced credibility.

8. Restoring a Balance: US post-sputnik space activities have served to restore confidence in general US scientific and technological leadership. They have brought about a much more cautious and qualified assessment of the permanence of the Soviet lead in space. But they have not succeeded in restoring the pre-sputnik gap in the general consensus regarding relative US and USSR capabilities, or in erasing the new image of the USSR and Soviet society. Lost ground has been regained to a point where the space race is, by and large, viewed as neck-and-neck: the expectation is now less that one side or the other will demonstrate clear ³victory² and more that for the foreseeable future there will be a see-sawing, with no single achievement viewed as a decisive index of superiority. How long a suspended judgment -- or an equilibrium of oscillating judgments -- can be maintained will depend upon the nature and tempo of future space developments. It is unlikely that any but the most massive or spectacular successes will, given present tendencies in public reactions, substantially modify current judgments.

9. Relative Standing: The dominant pattern in reactions, as noted, appears to be the tendency to expect space competition to be a neck-and-neck affair, with temporary successes accruing first to one side, then the other. But there are apparent certain regional differences.

-- In Western Europe, opinion is still confident about the general superiority of American scientific technology over Soviet scientific technology. This confidence, however, is tempered by the feeling that the Soviet Union is currently ahead in outer space research. (The Soviet lead is widely attributed to a refusal by the US administration to engage in a all-out, crash space program, a criticism sharpened by Western Europe's sense of the dependence of its security to a large measure on US military strength.)

In Latin America, initially greatly impressed by Soviet success in 1957, opinion -- at least articulate opinion -- generally appears to be that the two nations are about equal in space science. The US appears to have regained much if not all of the prestige lost following the original Soviet achievements, when many in the area felt the USSR to be ahead in at least the field of space, although not in the general level of scientific development.

-- In the Far East, although a wide gap exists between Japan and Southeast Asia in degree of interest in and understanding of the space contest and the issues involved, the dominant view appears to be that the contest is a near toss-up, now and for the immediate future. In Japan, where the USSR was seen as enjoying some superiority, there is growing conviction that the two powers are evenly matched, with the US enjoying qualitative, and the Soviets quantitative, superiority.

- - In Africa, it is probable that most opinion views East and West as about equal in technical accomplishments in the field of space -- an assessment, however, that represents a very significant revision of views concerning the nature of Soviet society, and with some opinion believing that the balance of power ³has shifted to the East.²

- - Near East and South Asian opinion cannot be categorized, and for some parts of the area evidence for a reliable assessment is lacking. In India, Soviet dramatic successes appear to have decisively implanted the opinion that the Soviet Union is now the world scientific leader. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Soviet achievements in space appear to hold the dominant position, although it is difficult to judge the depth and durability of this reaction, and whether it is accompanied

by the conviction that the USSR also enjoys a lead in general scientific and technical reputation. Greek and Turkish belief in the overall scientific pre-eminence of the US has been sustained, but the Greeks probably still consider the USSR ahead of the US in space research. Turkish comment reflects the view that the US, caught napping by the crafty Russians, has now overtaken the USSR; US space achievements have been greatly applauded, but it is possible that popular Turkish evaluations are colored by a tendency--clearly visible among strongly pro-Western and anti-Communist audiences, especially in countries with high dependence upon US support--toward self-induced reassurances regarding US and Western power. (Turkish students, in a survey at Ankara University, voiced a majority view that the USSR was ahead of the US in space science.)

In sum:

- Interest in space developments continues strong, but has shown a sharp decrease from the intense excitement that marked the first year or so following Sputnik I. Reactions have become more sophisticated, informed, and detached.
- Sensitivity to military implications is marked, and has produced strong concern over the possibility that the USSR now enjoys military superiority over the West, and a belief in some quarters that this is a fact.
- The US and the USSR space programs are generally assessed as competitive efforts, and there is notable concern regarding the need to limit the dangers seen in this rivalry. Soviet successes in space have produced a major revision in the image of the USSR and to some degree of the Soviet system, and lent greatly enhanced credibility to Soviet propaganda claims. The USSR, by appearing to have spectacularly overtaken the US in a field in which the US was very generally assumed to be first by a wide margin, is now able to present itself as fully comparable to the US and able to challenge it in any field it chooses -- perhaps the most striking aspect of the propaganda impact of space developments. Although most opinion still considers the US as probably leading in general scientific and technical accomplishments, the USSR is viewed in most quarters as leading in space science. The expectation is, however, that, for the foreseeable future, leadership will see-saw.
- There is a widespread tendency for wishful thinking and political sympathy and dependence to color estimates of achievements in space. It is probable that only the most massive or spectacular achievements are likely to modify substantially or durably the current pattern of reactions. It should be added, however, that space achievements will continue to be followed closely by world attention; their military implications will be closely scrutinized; and they will continue to be equated with military power and viewed as an index of a country's general level of scientific and technological advancement.

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