Greetings from Russia's Kirill Benediktov

Kirill Benediktov is a Russian historian, well-known science-fiction author, political analyst, member of the editorial board of the Terra America website, and regular commentator for the daily Izvestia. He currently serves as a consultant on strategy and program development for the Russian Government's Military-Industrial Commission. He sent these greetings to the Houston conference.

Dear conference participants, dear colleagues and friends,

Exactly one year has passed since the explosion of a meteoroid over Chelyabinsk, once again, reminded mankind of our extreme vulnerability to forces from outer space.

The history of our species has been marked by a number of global catastrophes of outer-space origin. I'll mention just one of them: the disappearance of the Clovis culture, which flourished in North America 14,000 years ago. It is likely that the demise of this culture was linked with the impact or explosion of a large object from outer space, on or above the ice fields in what today is Canada, approximately 12,900 years ago. The strike was so powerful that probable fragments of this celestial body have been located in New Mexico and South Carolina. The unusual form of these fragments—microspherules, nanodiamonds, and fullerenes—has led some to suggest that a large comet or swarm of comet fragments collided with the Earth.

That catastrophe interrupted the development of the American Indian tribes for a long time, but it did not annihilate mankind, because people were scattered across great expanses of the Earth's surface and were not in close communication with each other. Paradoxically enough, today's global, technogenic civilization is more vulnerable and offers a bigger target.

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Russia's Kirill Benediktov addressing a Schiller Institute conference in Germany, April 13, 2013.

This problem can be solved, but in order to solve it, we must overcome the profound crisis of mission-definition, of goal-setting, the lack of which has acted as a brake on man's expansion into space since the end of the Cold War.

For four decades, the Soviet Union and the USA fought for leadership in space research. Even though it lost the "Moon race," the USSR maintained its leading positions in the exploration of near-Earth space, rocket design, long-term orbital space stations, and the development of manned space programs.

This period ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of its industrial infrastructure, along with a significant portion of the skilled manpower employed in that industry. The space industry plunged into deep crisis, with dramatic reductions in financing for space exploration.

The Lack of Mission Orientation

The simple question, "Why do this?" has blocked the development of cosmonautics, ever since the end of the space race between the USSR and the USA. Not only in Russia, but, importantly, also in the USA, the space program continues to advance only by inertia, since the motivations of the 1960s and 1970s no longer hold any weight.

Without well-conceived long-term plans, the sector is doomed to running in place. The existing capacities, technologies, and financing will continue to be used for emergency objectives or for seeking answers to randomly arising challenges.

This crisis of a lack of mission orientation afflicts not only the Russian space program, but also, to a significant degree, the American. The U.S. space program today is far from having a global meaning or purpose. It suffers from disorderly planning and ad hoc financing. This is less noticeable in the unmanned programs (insofar as robotic missions are rather less expensive, they can achieve tangible results even if the financing is chaotic), but in manned space exploration the crisis is clearly at hand. Even a superficial look at NASA's "constructive criticism" website gives you a sense of the dimensions of this crisis. At the present time, the main objective of the U.S. space program is merely to maintain the sector as a whole, preserving jobs and not reducing employment in the older manufacturing programs. In other words, it chiefly fulfills a social function.

The space programs of India and China may be more mission-oriented. They are, however, structurally (albeit, not in terms of the technologies) at a stage of development corresponding to that of the Soviet and American space programs of the 1960s. Evidently, it is easier to define strategic goals for a national space program in its early stages of development. After achieving a certain level, however, such as the launch and operation of a habitable orbital space station, the goals and missions become vague, leading to a systemic crisis of the sector.

Both the USA and Russia need a clear, simple, and comprehensible mission for their space programs, answering that question of "Why do this?" in a way that is obvious and acceptable for everybody.

We think that the creation of a global early-warning system for the asteroid and comet threat could be at least one such mission. This system could be implemented as a supranational project under the aegis of the United Nations Organization. But the function of driver for the project should be taken on by the two powers whose achievements in space exploration can never by disputed by anyone: the United States and Russia.

I sincerely hope that this conference in Texas will be another step toward the future cooperation of our countries in mastering outer space and ensuring the security of our planet.