

---

September 26, 2008

EDITORIAL

## Russia, Georgia and the Space Station

Unless the Senate acts soon, the United States could lose its access to the International Space Station. The country is in a bind because NASA plans to retire the aging space shuttle fleet two years from now. Without a Congressional waiver, the agency will be barred from buying seats on Russia's space vehicles.

Many members of Congress are understandably furious over Russia's invasion of Georgia. Unless they approve a waiver, the United States will have to remove its crew from the space station in 2011 — leaving a very expensive investment essentially to the Russians.

The shuttles' successor vehicle, the Orion, won't be ready before 2015. That leaves a five-year gap where the only way to reach the station is via Russia's Soyuz vehicles. The capsules carry Russian cosmonauts and ferried American astronauts after the Columbia accident. The catch is that an arms-control law bans payments to Russia for activities related to the space station until Moscow takes steps to prevent the flow of weapons technology to Iran and others. Congress granted NASA a waiver through 2011. NASA needs an extension now because the Russians want a contract signed three years before any launch so they can produce the necessary hardware.

This page has strongly protested Russia's invasion of Georgia and its continued occupation of two separatist enclaves. We endorsed the Bush administration's decision to suspend action on a civilian nuclear agreement and bring other pressure until Moscow withdraws its troops and accepts international mediation.

We do not believe that the United States should cut off all dealings with Russia. And it is in the clear interest of this country to extend the waiver and keep American crews (as well as those of partner nations) on the space station. Some legislators and space experts are pressing NASA to continue the shuttle program to help plug the gap. Even then, the United States would still need to pay for Soyuz services. Only the Russian spacecraft can serve as a rescue vehicle for long-duration missions; the shuttles have to return to Earth after about two weeks.

The shuttle program's future is a separate argument that will need to be resolved by the next administration and Congress. The waiver needs to be extended right now. The House did so on Wednesday. The Senate needs to do the same before it adjourns.

Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---