



COMMITTEE ON

SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

REPUBLICANS

Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Brian Babin

*Subcommittee on Space & Aeronautics Hearing – NASA's Future in Low Earth Orbit:
Considerations for ISS Extension & Transition*

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We are at an inflection point for our nation's space program. Last year, NASA once again launched American astronauts on American rockets from American soil. Earlier this summer we witnessed two suborbital commercial human launches. Just last week, the first orbital spaceflight participant mission launched and safely returned to Earth after 3 days in space. The Space Launch System will launch within a few months, and the Artemis program to return to the Moon and venture to Mars is underway. We also celebrated the 20th anniversary of continuous occupation of the International Space Station (ISS) last November, recognizing Expedition 1 when Bill Shepherd ushered in the current era of space exploration.

A lot has happened since then. We suffered the tragic loss of *Columbia* in 2003, grounded the Shuttle fleet for over two years as part of the Return to Flight effort, completed Space Shuttle assembly of the ISS in 2011, cancelled the Shuttle program as we developed new spacecraft, and relied on Russian *Soyuz* launches for crew transfer for far too long. Throughout all of this, the ISS, and the international partnerships that enable it, remained resilient.

Now, after more than 20 years of continuous operations, the ISS is beginning to show its age. Cracks and leaks are popping up, solar arrays were recently upgraded, and the space suits necessary for space walks need to be replaced. The first segments of the ISS have a design life of roughly 15 years with a safety factor of two, meaning that with appropriate life extension measures the segments can reasonably be expected to last to 2028. While no law prevents NASA from operating the ISS as long as it deems necessary, it is past time to have a conversation about the future of the ISS and our presence in low Earth orbit.

Section 303 of the 2017 NASA Authorization Act called for NASA to develop an ISS Transition Plan and to update it biennially. While this is a good start, no significant decisions have been made about the future of the ISS and our presence in low Earth orbit. Administrator Nelson expressed support for continuing operations past 2024 at

one of our hearings this summer, and many of the international partners have expressed similar support, but a formal agreement has not been solidified. Other issues include how to prioritize upgrades to the existing ISS space suits used for space walks and the development of future space suits for the Lunar surface; engineering analysis of the lifetime of the ISS; whether we will reciprocate seat swaps with the Russians; and the development of future free fliers and other efforts to offset the operational costs of the ISS. We also need to understand the impacts of the recent incident involving the docking of the Russian Nauka module.

I proudly represent the Johnson Space Center, home of historic Mission Control and the ISS Program. Many of my constituents have a vested and personal interest in the success of the ISS. I want to see NASA not only fulfill the expectations of the ISS, but also carry on its legacy in other programs so that we do not retreat from space. Abandoning the ISS without a clear transition plan in place would only serve the interests of the Communist Chinese Party. Like in other domains, the CCP seeks to exploit vacuums left by great nations. If they are the only “game in town”, other nations will seek to partner with them to gain access to space. This would erode American strategic leadership and, unfortunately for those other nations, result in the exploitation of their own scientific, technical, and strategic standing.

The ISS is not only a bridge to space, but also a bridge to other nations. It binds us under the common cause of discovery. I am sure all of us share the goal of ensuring that the ISS and follow-on endeavors continue this special tradition.

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