

News Analysis: Half century after first manned space flight -- what has changed?

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MOSCOW, April 12 (Xinhua) -- Does life exist on other planets beyond the solar system? Are there any other planets like the Earth in our universe? And what does the universe look like?

On questions related to outer space, human beings have never stopped observing and thinking.

Yuri Gagarin, who made the first manned space flight on April 12, 1961, and orbited Earth for 108 minutes before safely landing, opened a window named "space" to humankind. The Soviet cosmonaut's journey continues to be an inspiration for the world to "conquer" space -- but now for more peaceful purposes.

After the Cold War, cooperation on space exploration and scientific researches has turned to a more pragmatic way. More and more countries are realizing that space programs are closely linked with their people's lives than ever before.

GAGARIN'S LEGACY INSPIRES PEACEFUL COOPERATION IN SPACE

The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution earlier this month that declares April 12 the International Day of Human Space Flight. The resolution has been supported by more than 60 countries.

"Man's space odyssey, the fruitful cooperation of many states in outer space would have been impossible without the very first step, Yuri Gagarin's flight," said Vitaly Churkin, Russia's permanent representative to the United Nations.

However, the first human space flight was actually a result of competition between the East and the West at the height of the Cold War when the Berlin Wall was built.

That competition gradually evolved, however, into a joint space project that has drawn more than 15 nations -- the International Space Station (ISS). Such a project would almost impossible to imagine before.

The Mars-500 project in Moscow, aimed at testing the physical and psychological strains on humans during a 500-day journey to "Mars," is another good example of the international cooperation in scientific research. The experiment included six crew members from four countries, including Russia, China, France and Italy.

Compared with the times of Gagarin, who died in a 1968 plane crash, mankind has changed its approach to space exploration, rendering it more pragmatic. That's according to cosmonaut Pavel Vinogradov, now a deputy head of the Space Flight Center in the Energy Rocket-Space Corporation.

"Early romanticism and space race have gone. Countries have been replaced by the business-oriented cooperation in the recent decade," Vinogradov told Xinhua.

Experts said the scale and costs of space explorations require massive international cooperation.

"Space programs have been more money-thirsty even than military programs, so the nations seek closer cooperation," Vinogradov said, "and this pays off."

STARDUST YIELDS TO PRAGMATISM

Unlike 50 years ago, space technologies now are more closely linked to people and more directly affect their daily lives. Nowadays, one just cannot imagine life without satellite TV or GPS.

Veteran cosmonaut Georgy Grechko said orbits have become construction sites rather than military facilities and the space industry itself has swiftly evolved into just another sector of the global economy.

Echoing Grechko, Vinogradov said space also is a testing ground for many other sectors, including the bio-technological and pharmaceutical industries.

"What is just as important, outer space has turned into a platform for close, open, and fruitful international cooperation for the benefits of global, universal peace and development," Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has said.

UN General Assembly President Joseph Deiss has said that the newly established International Day of Human Space Flight should serve as an opportunity to reflect on the importance of peaceful use of space to develop essential technologies and scientific breakthroughs.

"Space technology is used in matters diverse, such as the fight against climate change, against desertification, and against the loss of biodiversity," Deiss said. "The satellite images provided have given essential data when it comes to avoiding the risks of natural disasters."

So far, mankind has never stopped making progress beyond the earth's boundaries and the progress itself has never stopped sparking people's imagination about what is possible through the peaceful use and exploration of outer space.

What's more, humankind has never stopped the space dream.

"The task of the government is to inject into the people an ability to dream," said Igor Zadorin, a member of Russia's National Strategy Council.

Here is interesting news: NASA's head Charles Bolden arrived in Russia on the eve of Gagarin's flight anniversary and was expected to discuss Russia-U.S. cooperation on a joint flight to Mars by a nuclear-powered spacecraft.

What can we expect in the future?