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Georgia crisis sparks a new Cold War in space

Russia's clash with the United States over the conflict in Georgia has sparked fears that American astronauts could soon be grounded with no means of getting into space.

By Tim Shipman in Washington

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The US space agency Nasa is due to mothball the Shuttle programme in 2010 but the replacement spacecraft is not due to be ready until 2015, leaving a five year gap where the US is dependent on the Russians for a ride to the international space station.

Space campaigners in the US are now concerned that the Russians will pull the plug on the arrangement as the Kremlin flexes its diplomatic muscles, turning the future of space exploration into a diplomatic bargaining chip.

Vincent Sabathier, director of Human Space Exploration Initiative at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, wrote last week: "If recent Russian actions are any indicator, a technical excuse to completely block US access to the International Space Station for geopolitical reasons would fit nicely into the Kremlin toolkit."

The deal could also fall victim to stubborn congressmen, who do not want to pay the Russians for the right to

hitch a lift because they disapprove of Russian foreign policy.

Congress has to approve any payments to Russia because under American law public funds cannot be sent to a country like Russia that has aided weapons proliferation to state sponsors of terrorism like Iran.

Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the Moon and now a campaigner for further space exploration, voiced the fears of many when he told The Sunday Telegraph: "The US government cannot pay Russia for services to the space station unless the President can certify that Russia is no longer supporting Iran and these other countries.

"Well, we know that he can't do that. The only way around that is to have a waiver. That waiver that has been in effect expires in 2011. That has not been resolved yet so that we can have the ability to buy flights for US astronauts on Russian spacecraft."

Congressional supporters of the space programme now say that the Georgian confrontation has compounded that problem. Democratic senator Bill Nelson of Florida, where the shuttle launches, said the prospects of passing a waiver are in freefall. "With the aggressiveness of Russia in Georgia, I think it's dead on arrival," he said. "It is a lose-lose situation. We have a \$100 billion space station, and in theory, we couldn't even get people up there."

He added: "US civil space activity should not become a hostage to Russian objections to Georgia's Nato membership goals" or "new Cold War political manoeuvring."

The alternative to hitching a ride with the Russians would be for the US to try to strike a deal with China, which is rapidly expanding its human space flight programme.

But Mr Aldrin, like some senior Nasa staff, has voiced fears that China might beat the US back to the Moon, where Nasa wants to establish a permanent manned base.

Joining forces with the Chinese might be seen as an even greater humiliation than dependence on the Russian space agency.

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