

Sent: Tuesday, January 10, 2012 10:49 AM

Subject: Moscow Suspects US 'Zapped' Doomed Mars Probe?

Jim Oberg advises:

0. I am preparing an advisory on the 'Fobos-Grunt' probe 'Death Watch', with atmospheric entry now expected this coming Sunday or Monday.

1. This morning's torrent of wire stories about Russia accusing the US of sabotaging or zapping their doomed Mars probe -- are overblown. But they do reflect a sad aspect of Russian culture -- blame 'enemies' for any setbacks.

2. Here are some typical stories:

Russia's space chief says failures may be sabotage

Jan 10 // 08:43 AM CST // Washington Post

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-space-chief-says-countrys-spacecraft-may-have-suffered-from-hostile-interference/2012/01/10/gIQATfr2nP_story.html?wprss=rss_world

Shady side of Earth: Western trace in space probe's failure?

Russia Today // Published: 10 January, 2012, 14:49

<http://rt.com/news/phobos-grunt-probe-failure-versions-445/>

Russia Blames Outside Meddling for Space Failures, Izvestia Says

By Henry Meyer - Jan 10, 2012 5:42 AM CT

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-01-10/russia-blames-outside-meddling-for-space-failures-izvestia-says.html>

3. My response to the WaPo [Associated Press] report was to try and calm things down: "Popovkin was being very cautious in this comment,.."
That is, the head of Russia's space program explicitly made no accusation, but only, he stressed, 'asked a question IF'. But that's too cute by half.
Raising the possibility was all it took to do all the damage.

4. His exact words were: "We don't want to accuse anybody, but there are very powerful devices that can influence spacecraft now, and the possibility they were used cannot be ruled out." [full Interfax story, appended at end]

5. But he was somewhat irresponsible when he described a pattern that seemed to have no innocent explanation: "The frequent failure of our space launches, which occurred at a time when they were flying over the part of Earth not visible from Russia, where we don't see the spacecraft and do not receive telemetric information, are not clear to us."

6. This is silly. It is a feature of space launch trajectories that orbital adjustments must be made halfway around the first orbit, to circularize and stabilize subsequent orbits. All space shuttles did this. Many unmanned satellites do this. Other satellites fire new engines to depart from the low orbits, headed deeper into space.

7. The Russians must know that simple geography -- not evildoers lurking in shadows -- dictate where their communications 'blind spots' are. But the urge to shift blame seems strong.

8. An explicit earlier example that I wrote up for MSNBC is here:
"Russians Suggest US Killed Science Satellite"
April 4, 2007 [officials accuse US weapons test of zapping payload]
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17952518/>

9. In today's WaPo comment, I continued: "Sadly this is far from the first time that the Russian cultural instinct to 'blame foreigners' has appeared in the spaceflight industry. On the international space station, a whole series of Russian equipment breakdowns over recent years have at first been blamed on 'electrical interference' from the US side of the station, only later to have been traced to their true causes."

10. Specific and detailed accounts of earlier instances where the knee-jerk Russian reaction to their own equipment failing is to find some foreigner to blame are linked below, para 16.

11. This Russian behavior concerns us because of current partnerships in space. Since for the time being we are dependent for human orbital access on Russian space transportation, we are dependent on their proper safety investigations, so we need to encourage correct attitudes towards those problems.

12. As is usual in life, but especially in highly challenging fields such as spaceflight, the only way to overcome problems is to diagnose them accurately, or else any prescriptions or get-well efforts are useless, or worse.

13. So even hinting at the hand of 'enemies' is discouraging, and puts our own people in danger from wrong-headed responses.

14. We don't need to exaggerate Popovkin's comment, but we should recognize it as a symptom of an attitude we must live with, while we try to change it.

15. I will monitor and advise.

16. Specific stories of Russians blaming US -- or 'human error' -- for problems caused by their own equipment malfunctioning:

Soyuz Emergency Landings Investigation Lands With A Whimper
June 2009 [Russia blamed pyrobolt failures on US electrical surges]
http://www.aiaa.org/aerospace/images/articleimages/pdf/Soyuz_JUN2009.pdf

Internal NASA Reports Explain Origins of June Computer Crisis
October 2007 // Spectrum magazine [Russians blame US electrical power for short circuits]
<http://spectrum.ieee.org/aerospace/space-flight/space-station-internal-nasa-reports-explain-origins-of-june-computer-crisis>

Action-reaction in space: the "gyrodine war" heats up
February 28, 2005 [Russian spacesuit malfunction knocks station off kilter, but Russians blame American operator errors]
http://www.jamesoberg.com/02282005gyrodine_rus.html

Russian space officials say 'rushed' crew failed to shut hatch properly
11/1/2005 8:04:17 PM ET 2005-11-02T01:04:17
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9888881/>

The real significance of the ISS thruster test failure
The Space Review // May 8, 2006
<http://www.thespacereview.com/article/619/1>

Russians report snag in space safety system
updated 3/31/2010 7:10:50 PM ET
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/36119843/ns/technology_and_science-space/