NASA is bargaining with a US space startup for a Soyuz seat

NASA is planning to buy an astronaut seat on a Russian Soyuz spacecraft through Texas-based aerospace firm Axiom Space, according to two people familiar with the plans. The seat is a backup for NASA in case its upcoming ride with SpaceX runs into technical problems, and it suggests the agency is proceeding cautiously.

The agency announced Tuesday it was weighing options to procure a Soyuz seat as a safety net to keep the International Space Station staffed with US astronauts. It's the second time NASA has procured a Russian seat through a US-based company, following a deal with Boeing in 2017 for five Soyuz seats. This time, the deal is with Axiom — a startup that arranges private astronaut rides to space.

The terms of the agreement for the astronaut seat are still being negotiated, according to the two people who spoke *The Verge* under the condition of anonymity because the talks are private.

Buying Soyuz seats from a US company has only happened once before

The space agency relied on Russia to provide rides to the space station when the US shuttle program retired in 2011. NASA started its Commercial Crew Program after Russia hiked the prices of its Soyuz seats as high as $90 million — without it, Russia would have been the only option. Last year, SpaceX launched its first crew of US astronauts to space under the program.

An Axiom spokesman declined to comment.

“A U.S. company reached out to NASA with a proposal that could meet NASA’s needs,” agency spokesman Josh Finch said in a statement to *The Verge.* “However, we are unable to share the name of the company as NASA has not entered into any agreement regarding the seat and that information is procurement sensitive.”

NASA has been in talks with Russia’s space agency, Roscosmos, for months to trade Crew Dragon or Boeing Starliner seats for additional seats on Soyuz spacecraft, rather than buying those seats with cash. NASA expects to fly Russian cosmonauts alongside American astronauts starting in fall 2021, Finch said. The astronaut in the Axiom-brokered Soyuz seat would fly sometime between spring and fall of this year, he said.

In 2020, NASA bought a Soyuz seat from Russia for Kate Rubins for $90 million — and agreed to launch Russian cargo to the station for a period of two years, an “in-kind” deal potentially worth millions more. Now, NASA wants a seat on the April 10th MS-18 mission, which already has three Russian astronauts booked to fly. The deal with Axiom would likely involve booting one of the Russians from MS-18 to make room for a US astronaut.

It was unclear how much NASA is considering paying Axiom for the single Soyuz seat or what cut Axiom would get from the deal. Buying Soyuz seats from a US company has only happened once before, in 2017. Then, NASA bought from Boeing, which had obtained the rights to five seats in an unrelated settlement with Russia’s Energia. Boeing sold the seats to NASA for a total of $374 million, the agency said at the time.

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