Milbank

Space Business Review

A monthly round-up of space industry developments for the information of our clients and friends.

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PLANET LABS TO ACQUIRE BLACKBRIDGE

On July 15, Planet Labs, Inc. (Planet Labs), operator of the world's largest commercial Earth observation satellite constellation reportedly, announced it entered a definitive agreement to acquire Blackbridge Corp.'s geospatial business (Blackbridge) and its RapidEye five-satellite medium-resolution imaging constellation launched in 2008 (financial terms not disclosed). Expected to close in Q3 2015, the acquisition will afford Planet Labs access to Blackbridge's large archive of imagery and vast global network of over 100 distribution channels and customers.

SPIRE RAISES $40M IN SERIES B ROUND

On June 30, Spire Global Inc. (Spire), a San Francisco-based company developing a commercial weather satellite constellation, announced that it raised $40m through its Series B investment round. The company previously raised $25m in July 2014. Proceeds of the investment round will fund the manufacture and launch of 100 satellites by the end of 2017; Spire plans to launch its first satellites this September and deploy fully its 20-satellite first-generation constellation before 2016. Currently being manufactured in Glasgow in partnership with Clyde Space Ltd., Spire's satellites are three-unit cubesats with weather data collection sensors that employ GPS radio occultation for improved forecasting accuracy. In a related development, Seattle-based Spaceflight Industries, Inc. announced on July 13 that its Spaceflight Networks division is partnering with Spire to develop a low-latency ground station network.

ESA APPROVES NEW LV DEVELOPMENT

On July 16, the European Space Agency approved nearly €4.2b in contracts for Europe's next-generation Ariane 6 launch vehicle, its associated launch base and a more powerful version of the Vega launch vehicle called Vega-C. Airbus Safran Launchers will design and manufacture Ariane 6 while CNES, the French space agency, will serve as prime contractor for the Ariane 6 ground infrastructure and Avio SpA will serve as prime contractor for Vega-C.

ILS BEGINS MARKETING ANGARA 1.2

On July 16, ILS International Launch Services, Inc. announced that it is actively marketing the Angara 1.2 launch vehicle, capable of performing low- and medium-lift missions. Angara 1.2 will be launched, starting in 2017, from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome in Northern Russia, at least until completion of the new Vostochny Cosmodrome.

EUTELSAT, ESA TEAM UP FOR PAYLOAD

On July 9, the European Space Agency, Eutelsat Communications S.A. (Eutelsat) and Airbus Defence and Space entered into a Public-Private Partnership for the development of Quantum, a new-generation software-based satellite payload that will afford satellite operators flexibility to adjust on-orbit performance parameters, including power and coverage. Also on July 9, Eutelsat and Airbus Defence and Space UK (Airbus) signed an agreement for Airbus to manufacture the first Quantum satellite based on the new Geostationary Minisatellite Platform, to be developed and supplied by Airbus affiliate Surrey Satellite Technologies Ltd. The parties have not yet selected a launch services provider for the inaugural Quantum mission in 2018.

SPEEDCAST TO ACQUIRE SAIT

On July 28, Hong Kong-based MSS provider SpeedCast International Ltd. (SpeedCast) announced that it is purchasing SAIT Communications of Greece and Cyprus, a maritime communications provider with 2,500 customers, for $13.8m in cash and $400k in stock. The announcement comes on the heels of SpeedCast's acquisition of the teleports and satellite services business of NewSat Limited.

JULY LAUNCH SERVICES

July 10 – The Indian Space Research Organisation successfully launched five satellites, all manufactured by Surrey Satellite Technologies Ltd., on the PSLV launch vehicle. Two of the satellites are experimental; the other three comprise the DMC3 constellation of one-meter-resolution Earth observation satellites. China's Twenty-First Century Aerospace Technology Co. (21AT) has purchased the entire capacity of the DMC3 constellation – called Beijing-2 by 21AT – for seven years.

July 15 – Arianespace S.A. successfully launched the Star One C4 and MSG-4 satellites, for Embratel Star One of Brazil and Europe's Eumetsat meteorological monitoring organization, respectively, on an Ariane 5 launch vehicle. Star One C4, which was manufactured by SSL, is equipped with 48 Ku-band transponders and will be positioned at the 70°W orbital location to provide DTH services in Brazil and expand access to other Latin American countries and the United States. MSG-4, which was manufactured by Thales Alenia Space, will be positioned at the 3°W orbital location.