

Russian Space Agency considers Armageddon-like mission

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The Russian Space Agency is [considering a plan](#) [1] that evokes the 1998 disaster flick, [Armageddon](#) [2]. The head of the agency, Anatoly Perminov, mentioned that Russia is assessing a mission to [Apophis](#) [3], a 270-meter (885-foot) asteroid with the potential to cause serious damage. The difference between Hollywood and real life is that Apophis stands minimal chance of hitting Earth (odds of 1-in-250,000, according to NASA), and any mission would preclude nuclear weapons. The inclusion of Bruce Willis, Ben Affleck, and Aerosmith remains to be seen.

In the aforementioned film, a ragtag coterie of blue-collar workers prevent Earth's destruction by detonating a nuclear warhead *inside* an asteroid. Defying scientific logic, plausibility, and good screenwriting, the "deep-core drillers" blast off from Earth, land on the asteroid, drill a hole, and detonate the nuke. That, plus 150 minutes of explosions and lightning-fast cuts, is *Armageddon* in a nutshell. Real life would be quite different. Though details were scarce, Perminov insisted that nuclear weapons wouldn't be necessary.

According to Perminov, "Calculations show that it's possible to create a special purpose spacecraft within the time we have, which would help avoid the collision without destroying it (the asteroid) and without detonating any nuclear charges." Perminov advocates spending "several hundred million dollars" to prevent a disaster which could claim "hundreds of thousands of people."

An imminent disaster? Not quite. Before you start hoarding canned goods and building a fallout shelter, let's consider the facts—when Apophis was first

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discovered in 2004, astronomers [gave it](#) [4] as high as a 1-in-37 chance (2.7%) of impacting Earth in its first flyby in 2029. But subsequent research [indicated](#) [3] it'd come no closer than 18,300 miles (29,470 kilometers) above Earth's surface in 2029. NASA has since calculated a 1-in-250,000 chance (49 million km from Earth) by 2036. Another "close encounter" in 2068 would present 1-in-330,000 odds. Doesn't exactly call for worldwide panic.

NASA, the European Space Agency, and the Chinese space agency would be included in any thrilling save-the-world mission. Should we spend "several hundred million dollars" (likely a gross underestimate) to forestall a far-from-imminent disaster? As much as I'd like to see Steven Tyler serenade the world, I'd give it a pass.

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[1] http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/E/EU_RUSSIA_ASTEROID_ENCOUNTER?SITE=TXKER&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT

[2] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armageddon_\(1998_film\)#cite_note-9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armageddon_(1998_film)#cite_note-9)

[3] <http://neo.jpl.nasa.gov/apophis/>

[4] http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/asteroid_update_B_041227.html