

MOON BASE RIVALRY

America and China Redraw the Lunar Map

The race to plant a permanent presence on the Moon has officially graduated from science fiction to line items in national budgets, which is how you know it's serious. In 2026, the United States and China are pursuing very different roads to a lunar base, and both lead to the same parking spot: the south pole, the most coveted patch of frozen real estate in the solar system.

Nobody has ever visited it. It is nonetheless the subject of a great-power turf war, because humanity has never met an empty place it didn't want to fence off.

THE NEW SPACE CONTEST

The latest American move is a full reset. NASA has quietly euthanised its lunar-orbiting Gateway station, a project that spent years absorbing money in orbit around a Moon nobody was landing on, and redirected the funds toward an actual base on the actual surface, backed by a reported \$20 billion over seven years.

The Moon base is now the centrepiece of America's post-Artemis strategy, a bold place to put a centrepiece you haven't built yet.



MOON BASE RIVALRY



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\$20 BILLION OVER SEVEN YEARS: AMERICA'S SURFACE-BASE BET

China, meanwhile, is proceeding at the stately pace of a country that plans in dynasties: astronauts by around 2030, a base to follow under its International Lunar Research Station.

Washington is trying to compress time; Beijing is trying to outlast it. One side is sprinting, the other is doing tai chi, and both insist they are winning.

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AMERICA'S MOON BASE PUSH

NASA's revised plan is the boldest reshuffle of Artemis in years. Rather than fussing over a station orbiting the Moon (like renting a hotel room with a view of the house you refuse to enter), the agency will build directly on the surface, south pole first, starting with robotic scouts, rovers, communications gear and power systems, including nuclear-energy testing, because nothing says 'we come in peace' like a reactor in a crater.

The timeline is getting uncomfortably specific, which for a space programme is either confidence or hubris: uncrewed missions first, then astronauts, with one public roadmap sketching a first landing in 2028 and construction soon after.

The schedule converts the base from a prestige project into an operational contest, complete with deadlines that someone, somewhere, will eventually have to explain missing.

ACHIEVING THE VISION MOON BASE

SYSTEMS



TRANSPORTATION



AUTONOMY & ROBOTICS



LOGISTICS



COMMUNICATIONS & POSITIONING, NAVIGATION, AND TIMING



HABITATION



POWER



MOBILITY



PHASE
01



PHASE
02



PHASE
03

PROGRESSION



LAUNCHES

- 25
- 27
- 29



LANDINGS

- 21
- 24
- 28



CARGO TO SURFACE

- ~4,000 KG
- ~60,000 KG
- ~150,000 KG

NOW - 2029

SECURE RELIABLE ACCESS TO
LUNAR SURFACE AND EXPERIMENT

2029 - 2032

ESTABLISH INITIAL MOON BASE
OPERATING CAPABILITY

2032 - BEYOND

ACHIEVE SEMI-PERMANENT
CREW PRESENCE

BUILDING AN ENDURING LUNAR PRESENCE

SOURCE: NASA



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The model also leans heavily on the private sector, with companies supplying landers, rovers and drones as NASA conjures a commercial lunar supply chain rather than a purely government outpost.

This buys flexibility. It also means American ambitions now rest on contractors agreeing with each other, on time, under budget, a phenomenon last observed in the wild sometime never.

CHINA'S STEADY BUILDOUT

China's programme looks slower on paper, but the paper is misleading. Beijing intends to land astronauts by 2030, then expand toward a base. A 2023 roadmap described a three-stage plan: a 'basic version' of the station first, then a fuller buildout, the lunar equivalent of moving in with a mattress and a kettle and renovating later.

2030: CHINA'S CREWED LANDING TARGET

The approach fits China's broader method: test, iterate, scale, repeat until the competition gets nervous. Its robotic record on the Moon is already formidable, and those missions are laying groundwork for a crewed landing and a station. Beijing is not chasing speed for applause; it is chasing permanence, which is far more annoying to compete against.

The plans extend to energy and logistics too: early ILRS concepts reportedly include a surface nuclear reactor, a reminder that lunar permanence is not about photo opportunities but about power, materials and survival, the unglamorous trinity that decides who gets to stay.

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WHY THE SOUTH POLE MATTERS

The south pole is the prize because it combines strategy with plumbing: water ice, useful terrain and resource potential. Whoever builds first may shape access to the ice, the routes and the industrial footholds that follow. It is the oldest story in expansion, now performed at minus 230 degrees: arrive early, claim the good corner, and let everyone else negotiate with you.

This is why the affair is bigger than exploration. A south-pole base could become humanity's first genuine logistics node off Earth, where transport, power, communications and extraction congeal into a lunar economy. For Washington, it feeds the Mars strategy; for Beijing, a permanent off-world address. Neither side says 'gas station to the solar system' out loud, but everyone has done the maths.

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GEOPOLITICAL MEANING

The deeper story is that lunar infrastructure has become great-power competition with better scenery. NASA officials openly frame China's rise as a challenge to American leadership. Flags and footprints are yesterday's currency; the new metric is concrete, or whatever regolith-based substitute survives the engineering reviews.

For the United States, the test is whether commercial partnerships and a reworked Artemis plan can deliver a visible win before China's crewed milestone. For China, it is converting patience into a programme that outlasts political cycles. The real contest is not who lands first, but who builds the system least likely to fall over.

GEOPOLITICS SUNDAY BRIEF No 24 – MOON RIVALRY INDUSTRIAL AND STRATEGIC RISKS

America's advantage is its ecosystem of contractors and launch providers; its risk is that same ecosystem's fondness for schedule slips, interface disputes and funding drama, especially after NASA rewrote its architecture mid-race. China's risk is the mirror image: a disciplined state programme that may discover, at altitude, that discipline is not speed, and that 2030 arrives whether or not the hardware does.

CONCLUSION

So here we are: two superpowers spending fortunes to reach a frozen, airless wasteland first, each insisting it is doing so calmly. The Americans are betting that capitalism can be strapped to a rocket; the Chinese are betting that patience compounds like interest. Both are probably right about the other's weaknesses and wrong about their own. The Moon, meanwhile, has spent four billion years being magnificently indifferent, and will greet whichever flag arrives with the enthusiasm it showed the last one: none whatsoever. This race will be decided not by who gets there, but by who can afford to stay, and on this the scoreboard is still blank, and the Moon is in no hurry to fill it in.

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F R A N K

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