

Artemis Space Program

How should missions to the moon be governed?

Key Concepts:

Nationalism: Pride in and promotion of one's nation, often expressed through competition with other nations for prestige, power, or resources.

Sovereignty: The right of a state (or other actor) to govern a territory and make rules within it — in space, this concept is legally unresolved.

The launch of Artemis II on April 1, 2026, marks humanity's first crewed journey toward the Moon in more than five decades, but it is far more than a technological milestone. The mission is a highly visible expression of American national ambition and an opening move in a contest over who will shape the governance of space in the coming decades.

The Apollo program (1961–1972) was openly nationalistic: a Cold War demonstration of American technological and ideological superiority over the Soviet Union. Artemis is more complex. It is framed as an inclusive, multilateral endeavour. The crew includes the first non-American deep-space astronaut, Jeremy Hansen of Canada, as well as the first person of colour and first woman to travel beyond low Earth orbit. These choices are deliberate political signals about the character of American-led exploration. Yet beneath this inclusive framing, the program's architecture is deeply competitive. The United States has used the Artemis Accords, a set of non-binding principles now signed by 61 countries, to establish a US-led coalition for space exploration.

China's rival framework, the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS), has attracted 13 partner nations including

Russia, and aims for a crewed lunar landing by 2030. The two programs represent not just different timetables but competing visions of space governance. The Artemis Accords assert that nations may extract lunar resources without this constituting a territorial claim. This is partly an interpretation of the 1967 Outer Space Treaty's prohibition on national appropriation. China and Russia argue this is a unilateral redefinition of international law designed to legitimise US commercial interests.

This dispute has direct consequences for the concept of sovereignty in space. The Outer Space Treaty establishes the Moon as a global commons, meaning a domain beyond national jurisdiction. Yet, both the Accords and China's ILRS framework implicitly stake out zones of influence that function like territorial claims, even without explicitly making them. The question of who governs access to the lunar south pole's water ice deposits, which are essential for long-term human presence, may become one of the defining sovereignty disputes of the twenty-first century.

The Artemis Space Program illustrates how nationalism and technological competition can persist even when wrapped in the language of science, cooperation, and humanity's shared future.



Comprehension Questions

1. What is Artemis II and why is it significant?
2. How does the Artemis Program reflect a shift in US space strategy compared with the Apollo program?
3. Explain the legal argument at the centre of the dispute between the Artemis Accords and the Outer Space Treaty.
4. Why have China and Russia declined to join the Artemis Accords, and what alternative framework have they proposed?
5. How is the concept of a "global commons" applied to outer space, and what pressures is it now facing?

Thinking Questions

1. *"The Artemis program is nationalism dressed in the language of multilateralism."* To what extent do you agree with this statement? Use evidence from the program's structure, partnerships, and legal positions.
2. To what extent does the concept of sovereignty apply to the Moon? In your answer, consider the Outer Space Treaty, the Artemis Accords, and the ILRS framework.
3. Compare the geopolitical dynamics of the 1960s Space Race with the current lunar competition. In what ways is the analogy useful, and in what ways does it break down?
4. What might be some long-term implications of two competing, non-interoperable lunar frameworks for international law and cooperation in space.

Further Research

1. Do further research into the Artemis Accords and the 1967 Outer Space treaty. How are they meant to govern state action and cooperation for space missions?

Artemis Accords

Outer Space Treaty (1967)

2. How might these two treaties be used to govern future space travel?