



The Space Force Must Lead Without Fighting—And It Starts With the Moon

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For more than 30 years, the Department of Defense (DOD) has focused on "warfighting," emphasizing violent combat at the tactical and theater level over other national defense concerns, especially strategically. With little political benefit to show for decades of battlefield victories, the DOD has begun to revisit the strategic level of war.

One of the fruits of this return to strategy is a new doctrine document, the *Joint Concept for Competing*, issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Instead of seeking mere battlefield success, it champions victory in strategic competition, which it defines as "a persistent and long-term struggle that occurs between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other." This victory does not necessarily require combat. Rather, a critical determinant is shifting the competition to valuable areas where the U.S. has strong comparative advantages.

Here, cislunar space, defined as the moon and its surroundings, looms large. The Space Foundation recently measured the global space economy to be worth \$469 billion in 2021, with average growth in excess of 6 percent per year, mostly driven by U.S. commercial activity. Dozens of new lunar missions, many from states new to cislunar operations, are anticipated in the next decade. Cislunar space, in other words, is among the most important strategic theaters of the 21st century, and is a region where America's comparative advantage is nearly insurmountable. That is, if it's nurtured intelligently.

Cislunar space has taken geopolitical center stage recently, with both Russian and Indian probes attempting to land near the lunar south pole. Russia's attempt failed spectacularly, but India's Chandrayaan-3 probe touched down successfully. Here, India's success is also an American one, because—in one of the Biden administration's most notable geopolitical victories to date—New Delhi has signed the Artemis Accords, NASA's international legal and political framework to explore and develop the moon. As a result, it demonstrated that, at least for the moment, America's space partners are succeeding, while its adversaries are not.

U.S. technological strength in cislunar space, led by NASA's Artemis Program, far eclipses either Russia or India's small probes. NASA is flying equipment that will land humans on the lunar surface in 2025. By contrast, Russia's next robotic lunar lander, Luna 26, will not fly until 2027. In both technology and geopolitics, U.S. advantages in the cislunar theater are unmatched.

The moon is pictured in the night sky over Berlin on Sept. 6, 2023. DAVID GANNON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Another great potential American cislunar advantage is the United States Space Force (USSF). The service's senior leaders are hesitant to claim cislunar space as their responsibility, preferring to wear the comfortable but myopic "warfighting" mantra. But, as the *Competing* strategy noted, America's military services are not simply in the "warfighting business," but also in the "national security business." Since the USSF has little to no space weapons capability, for now it is, at best, a supporting player in "warfighting." However, the USSF is responsible for securing national interests in the space domain, giving it the opportunity to stake out its role as the DOD's pre-eminent expert in strategic competition in the cislunar theater.

Increasingly, the Pentagon is embracing the importance of this domain. Taking inspiration from its successful efforts to pioneer the internet, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) recently announced it would undertake a seven month-long "10-Year Lunar Architecture Study" to "rapidly develop foundational technology concepts" essential for developing an integrated, common infrastructure on the moon that can serve civil, military, and commercial users. The study will also "seek to establish an analytical framework that defines new opportunities for rapid scientific and commercial activity on and around the Moon through collective infrastructure investments." In other words, DARPA is investigating what America must do to win the strategic competition in cislunar space.

The results will undoubtedly go far in identifying how America and its allies can intelligently compete in the cislunar theater. But it will take the men and women of the USSF, working in tandem with NASA and America's commercial space industry, to develop and execute the strategy necessary to win that competition—and to keep America in its perch as the world's preeminent space power. Here, the moon is a very good place to start.

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