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Anticipating Artemis-II, Commercial Lunar Development, International Law amid Shifting Relations, and more

SPACE INDUSTRY REPORT

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, NASA and the world witnessed the last time that humans landed on the Moon, in the backdrop of a 'space race' defined by Cold War tensions, nuclear proliferation, and a standoff between the superpowers of the US and USSR, vying to gain the geopolitical upper hand in this new domain. The US had, though, already won this race earlier on, with the historic crewed landing in 1969 of the Apollo 11 mission. As professor of air and space law, Michelle Hanlon, describes, by 1970 the US had '...already landed on the Moon, and competition centered on demonstrating technological capability, political and economic superiority and national prestige.'

However, Hanlon also argues that the strategy for the Artemis era is different from that of the 1970s. Artemis-II is currently due to launch in March, and will take crew around the Moon, on the same trajectory as the uncrewed Artemis-I mission, further than any human has ever travelled into space, and back again. Artemis-III will follow this, planned for 2028, and land humans on the lunar surface for the first time since 1972. Hanlon argues that this new era, defined by global competition and plans for a sustained lunar presence, can now show how '... partnerships and the ability to shape how activity on the Moon is conducted.'

In this issue of our Monthly Report, we will discuss the concept of global cooperation, featured in our Legal Review, where we discuss how geopolitical tensions might be shaping commitments to international law and governance. However, in our first article here, we take a look at the upcoming historic Artemis-II mission, and discuss just how this represents a new era of global cooperation and competition.

Image: NASA

Image: NASA/Sam Lott

The Artemis Project Origins - A Global Return to the Moon?

The Artemis Programme was formally established in 2017, under the first Trump Administration. Space Policy Directive-1 was published that year, titled 'Reinvigorating America's Human Space Exploration Program', and amended the existing National Space Policy of 2010. The amendment specifically writes that the US is to:

> "Lead an innovative and sustainable program of exploration with commercial and international partners to enable human expansion across the solar system and to bring back to Earth new knowledge and opportunities. Beginning with missions beyond low-Earth orbit, the United States will lead the return of humans to the Moon for long-term exploration and utilization, followed by human missions to Mars and other destinations;"

The project then established a new age of lunar and deep space exploration, one based on commercial and international cooperation, as well as growing competition.

Commercial Partnerships - Era of Private Leadership

The following year, in 2018, NASA established its Commercial Lunar Payloads Services programme in order to seek commercial partners to develop technology to deliver payloads to the surface of the Moon. This signalled a new direction for the agency, whereby it would purchase transportation services as appose the developing its own. NASA added 14 eligible vendors to the programme, and has so far seen some significant success. Astrobotic launched its first commercial lunar landing mission in 2024, and although it experienced a fuel leak anomaly, it achieved several milestones in preparation for its upcoming mission in 2026. In the same year, Intuitive Machines successfully landed on the Moon, marking a curtain-raising moment for commercial lunar exploration, supporting the Artemis vision.

In 2025, Intuitive Machines went on to land again on the Moon, as did Firefly Aerospace, the latter conducting a fully-successful mission. These missions carried multiple payloads, including NASA suite instruments, essential for developing technologies and infrastructure for the long-term use and habitation of the Moon. The CLPS programme is continuing to source commercial delivery partners up to 2028, while NASA's Johnson Space Center has issued a call for a **CLPS 2.0** programme.

The private sector is contributing elsewhere. The Artemis project will also utilise a crewed lunar rover, as the Apollo missions did with the Lunar Roving Vehicle (LRV). NASA has contracted three commercial teams to compete in the development of a new rover, named the Lunar Terrain Vehicle (LTV), to be used from the Artemis V mission. The leading companies are Intuitive Machines, Lunar Outpost and Astrolab. NASA is to select one of these teams, which will provide an LTV, which will also be leased as a service. The spacesuits for the Artemis programme are also outsourced, and are currently being developed by US space infrastructure developer, Axiom Space, for the Artemis-III crewed landing missions.

These are just a few examples of how the private sector forms a key pillar of the Artemis project. Moving forward, there is also a continuing trend of commercialisation, as private actors innovate and demonstrate technologies for lunar communications, resource mining, energy generation, robotics, and more.

IM Lunar Terrain Vehicle (Image: Intuitive Machines)

Firefly Aerospace's Blue Ghost on the Moon (Image: Firefly Aerospace)

The Artemis Accords and International Cooperation

Michelle Hanlon also describes the US approach to lunar exploration as '...intentionally open', and the Artemis Programme is '...designed so partners, both other countries and companies, can operate within a shared framework for exploration, resource use and surface activity.'

Indeed, the Artemis project brings in key international partners on technology development. A host of US companies are responsible for the development of the launch system (SLS) and the module (Orion), while the European Space Agency (ESA) takes charge of the development of the European Service Module, in partnership with Airbus. This provides the spacecraft with electricity, propulsion, thermal control, air, and water in space. Japan will also play a key

role. As well as sending astronauts (as well as ESA), JAXA (Japanese Space Agency) and Toyota are developing the 'Lunar Cruiser', a pressurised lunar rover, to be delivered by the 2030s.

International partners, including the UAE, will also cooperate on the development of the Lunar Gateway, an orbital lunar space station, among other initiatives.

The Artemis project also seeks to create a level-playing field regarding principles of governance through the establishment of the Artemis Accords in 2020. These non-binding principles '...reinforce the commitment by signatory nations to the Outer Space Treaty, the Registration Convention, the Rescue and Return Agreement, as well as best practices and norms of responsible behavior for civil space exploration and use', (NASA) and as of February 2026, there are 61 Signatories to the Accords. The Accords do have their sceptics, and it is to be seen how some divisive points might be implemented, such as provisions on resource exploitation and the use of 'safety zones'. However, they do nonetheless provide some form of enhanced commitment to setting normative behaviours in outer space, while international law-making seeks to catch up.

(Image: Adobe)

Global Competition - A New 'Race'?

Hanlon continues to write that '...as Artemis II heads toward the Moon, China will also continue to advance its lunar ambitions, and competition will shape the pace and manner of activity around the Moon.' Indeed, previous NASA administrators have also reflected this, with Bill Nelson warning that the US is **'in a race'** with China, and that China could use the guise of scientific research to gain a foothold on the Moon, only to then appropriate swathes of territory. Furthermore, the new NASA head, **Jared Isaacman**, struck a similar tone, stating that the US 'this is not the time to wait, but to act', and that if they fall behind, they '...may never catch up.'

Artemis-II represents a critical step toward the US winning that race, and the Artemis project has recently been hastened by a Presidential **Executive Order**, titled 'Ensuring American Space Superiority'. This commits to returning astronauts to the lunar surface by 2028, which would be ahead of the anticipated Chinese crewed landing in 2030. Furthermore, it also calls for '...establishing initial elements of a permanent lunar outpost by 2030 to ensure a sustained American presence in space and enable the next steps in Mars exploration...'

Returning to the Moon is indeed not only about technological prowess and mere bragging rights, but about establishing the leadership which takes humanity into a new era of exploration, one which will be defined by not just scientific exploration, but geopolitical leadership and economic opportunities.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Illustration of HLS on the Moon (Image: NASA)

From Artemis to a Commercial Lunar Landscape? Updates on Lunar Mission Development

NASA's Artemis-II mission represents a curtain-raising moment in the history of lunar exploration, and indeed humanity's footprint in outer space. For the first time in over 50 years, a crewed spacecraft will return to the Moon, following the same trajectory of the uncrewed Artemis-I mission in 2022, around the far side of the Moon, further than any human has travelled into space, and back. This sets the stage for crewed landing missions from 2028, and the beginnings of lunar infrastructure and a sustained lunar presence.

Supporting this future are a plethora of State and commercial missions, establishing and validating the technology to support this future. In January, NASA reaffirmed plans to deliver a nuclear fission reactor to the Moon by 2030, as a means of providing seamless power solutions, even during the two-week-long lunar nights. A partnership has been formed with the US Department of Energy (DoE), while also seeking commercial partners on the project. Russia is also working on a reactor to be delivered by 2036, and provide power for lunar rovers, observatories and infrastructure linked to the Chinese-led International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) project.

NASA has also salvaged its plagued VIPER project (Volatiles Investigating Polar Exploration Rover), which was cancelled in July 2024, due to rising costs and launch delays. The agency later sought proposals from the private sector to deliver the rover, which is designed to '... explore the relatively nearby but extreme environment of the Moon in search of ice and other potential resources.' A task order has now been awarded to Blue Origin, which will deliver the rover in 2027, using its Blue Moon Mk-1 lander. While this represents deeper commercialisation of space exploration and utilisation, according to SatNews, it is also an indication of the evolution of the NASA Commercial Lunar Payloads Services (CLPS) programme, which initially awarded contracts to private companies to demonstrate commercial lunar deliver technology, but has now stepped into a new era whereby NASA are willing to entrust their flagship projects with reliable CLPS partners.

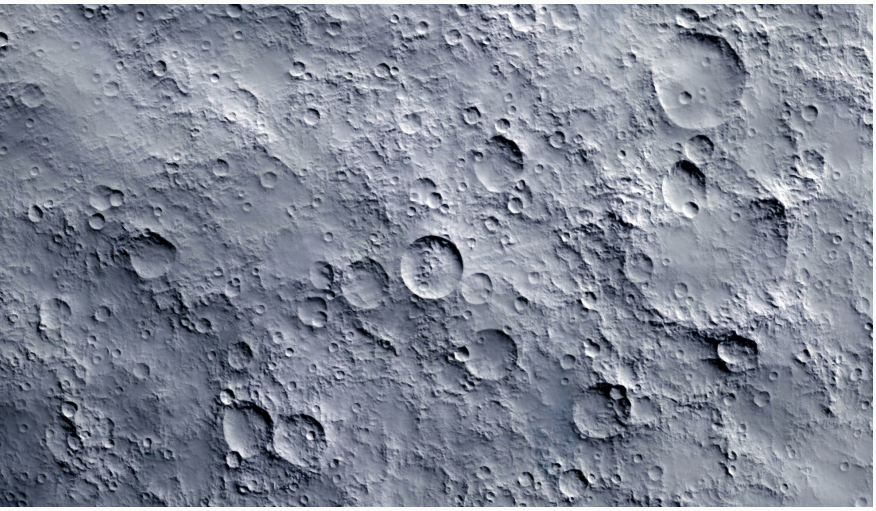
Blue Origin is yet to launch its Blue Moon lander, but in January, it was rolled and sent for delivery to NASA's facility in Houston, in order to carry out pre-launch testing in its thermal vacuum chamber. Blue are ramping up efforts in the lunar sector, having recently suspended flights of their New Shepherd tourist launch vehicle in order to focus resources on lunar development. In another boost for company, NASA Administrator, Jared Isaacman, has opened up the option of competition between Blue and SpaceX to deliver a Human Landing System (HLS) for the Artemis missions. SpaceX were awarded the contract to provide an HLS for Artemis-III, but the project has experienced setbacks and the company still needs to perform more validation flights of its Starship. NASA are facing growing competition from China to land crew on the Moon, with the latter expected to deliver taikonauts to the lunar surface by 2030.

The US is certainly utilising its vibrant commercial sector in order to build and maintain a lead in lunar exploration. The CLPS programme has successfully delivered the first commercial lunar landers in history, from both Firefly Aerospace and Intuitive Machines, while the Luna-10 project from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has sought to explore how to develop a commercial, scalable and monetizable lunar economy over the next 10 years. DARPA, in October 2025, published its Commercial Lunar Economy Field Guide, which offers a look at technology concepts that could help orchestrate off-Earth economic development (space.com). Services which will need to be provided, according to the Guide, include power, communications, data and positioning, navigation and timing (PNT), while Michael Nayak, the Guide's editor, also highlighted the potential of resource mining.

Potential resources to be exploited include water, which will be a priority resource, as it will be essential to support activities and habitats, providing consumable water, oxygen and rocket fuel. Furthermore, much is discussed about the potential market for retrievable resources and the isotope helium-3. Companies including Interlune (US), Magna Petra (US) and LH3M (US) are exploring this prospect, with the former planning to deliver a spectrometer to measure the

quantities of helium-3 in summer this year. According to QY Research, the market for helium-3 is set to grow at an annual rate of 18.6% between the years 2025 and 2031. The isotope is seen as a potential clean fuel for nuclear fusion reactors, while it is also used for cooling quantum computers, and for medical imaging. Interlune have already signed contracts for the commercial delivery of helium-3, including a contract with **Bluefors** (Finland), potentially worth $300 million.

Additionally, **Black Moon Energy Corporation** (US) is partnering with NASA JPL and Caltech in order to deliver a robotic mission to the Moon, focused on recovering helium-3. The company sees the market for global energy needs, which could reach $40 trillion, according to an article from *Quantum Zeitgeist*.



(Image: Adobe)

> We extract the Helium-3 resource and deliver it to earth.
>
> **Black Moon Energy**

The Race for LEO: Mega-Constellations, Manufacturing, and Orbital Data Centres

Competition in Earth orbit continues to expand rapidly. According to the **European Space Agency**, there are currently 14,200 active satellites in orbit, with Starlink accounting for **almost 10,000**. In January, SpaceX were granted permission from the Federal Communications Commission to launch an additional 7,500 Gen2 Starlink satellites, bringing the total authorisation to 15,000 (first set were granted in 2022). This expansion, however, is met with additional rivalling networks. China has already laid out plans for its own broadband megaconstellations, which include Guowang (13,000 satellites), Honghu-3 (10,000), and **Thousand Sails** (10,000, initial filing for 1300).

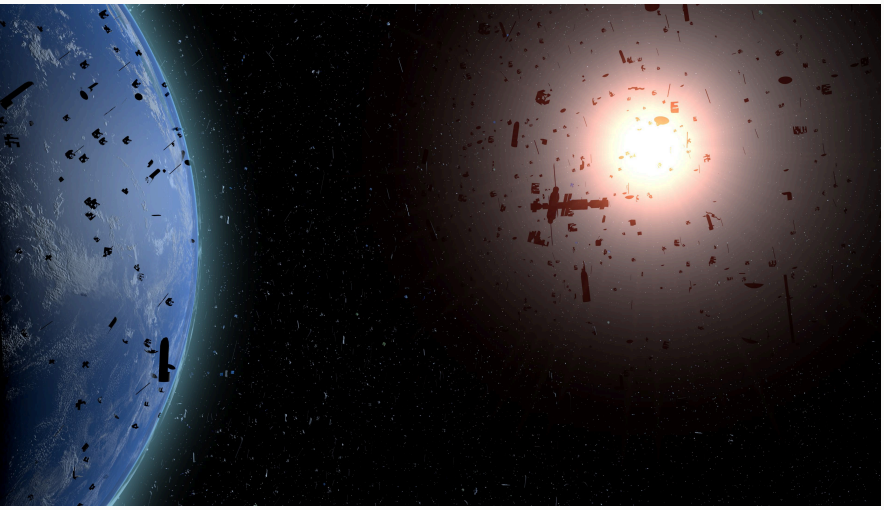
China, though, has taken another significant step, in filing an application with the International

Telecommunications Union (ITU) to launch nearly 200,000 satellites for two constellations, CTC-1 and CTC-2. According to the **Global Times**, this application provides frequency allocations, while '...China is planning its space deployment over the next decade and beyond, rather than focusing on short-term launches.' China will, though, be wary of simply using the filing to reserve allocations, as the ITU has mechanisms in place to prevent 'paper satellites', those which only exist in a filing, but do not launch. Article 11 of the ITU Radio Regulations states that 'The notified date of bringing into use of any frequency assignment to a space station of a satellite network or system shall be not later than seven years...', and that the **World Radiocommunication Conference (WRC-19)**, it was agreed that systems are required to '...to achieve 10% deployment within two years...50% within five years, and complete constellation deployment within seven years.' These requirements will undoubtedly become increasingly vital given the pace of expansion and congestion, particularly in low Earth orbit, and furthermore, given Article 44 of the ITU Constitution, which requires that States '... endeavour to limit the number of frequencies and the spectrum used to the minimum essential...', and identifies that '...radio frequencies and any associated orbits, including the geostationary-satellite orbit, are limited natural resources and that they must be used rationally, efficiently and economically...' These limits are, though, undoubtedly being tested.

The value of LEO is being demonstrated through more in-space services as well. UK in-space manufacturing firm, Space Forge, has demonstrated its ability to power up its 1000 °C furnace in orbit, as a means of producing high-quality crystals for manufacturing semiconductor materials, aboard its Forgestar-1 satellite. According to Joshua Western, CEO and co-founder of Space Forge, 'Generating plasma on orbit represents a fundamental shift, it proves that the essential environment for advanced crystal growth can be achieved on a dedicated, commercial satellite — opening the door to a completely new manufacturing frontier.' Utilising the benefits of microgravity for producing delicate structures has also been applied by the US company, Varda Space, which, for the first time in 2024, successfully produced crystals for the pharmaceutical drug, ritonavir. The company also demonstrated its first successful reentry mission of 2026 in January, with its W-5 mission.

Eyes are also on the mounting interest in the development of space-based orbital AI data centres. In 2025, Google announced its 'Project Suncatcher', which aims to place data centres in orbit, which would provide solutions for energy-intensive terrestrial equivalents, in having near-seamless access to solar energy. Blue Origin has also announced project 'Terawave', a planned 5,000+ satellite constellation, which is designed to '...service tens of thousands of enterprise, data center, and government users who require reliable connectivity for critical operations', while SpaceX, not to be outdone, has reportedly filed a request with the FCC for an orbital data constellation, which several sources are claiming is to consist of up to **1 million satellites**. While one aspect of space-based data is considered to be a

sustainable energy solution, one must question how this further rapid expansion would affect the space environment, which is already considered to be increasingly contested, congested and competitive.



(Image: Adobe)

> 1.2 million space debris objects from greater than 1 cm to 10 cm
>
> **ESA**

Debris and On-Orbit Servicing: Astroscale, Collision Risks, and the Quest for Sustainable Operations

According to ESA, there are now estimated to be 54,000 objects greater than 10cm in orbit, and 1.2 million between 1cm and 10cm. This is compounded by an increasing number of payloads being launched annually, which increased from 2857 in 2024 to 4522 in 2025 (stats sourced from John McDowell). Should the plans go ahead for significantly larger constellations, the risk that debris presents is set to exponentially increase, threatening the stability of Earth orbit, as well as on Earth.

In 2024, a NASA battery jettisoned from the ISS crashed through a home in Florida, while in 2025, a 400kg piece of debris landed near a village in Kenya. Also in 2025, an uncontrolled reentry of a Falcon-9 upper stage scattered debris across locations in Poland, while European countries were on alert in January this year due to the reentry of a Chinese upper-stage rocket (Zhuque-3 from commercial launcher company, Landspace). This is to name but a few incidents. Furthermore, operators need to conduct more collision avoidance manoeuvres in the increasingly congested space environment. **SpaceX reported** that it had to carry out almost 150,000 collision avoidance manoeuvres between December 2024 and May 2025, while in December, SpaceX Starlink satellites were reportedly orbiting only 200m away from 9 Chinese satellites.

These incidents call for better coordination and traffic management rules, and also a means of mitigating the risk of collision and the creation of uncontrollable space debris. At the International level, there are frameworks to address some of these risks. The Inter Agency Debris Space Debris Mitigation Guidelines (SDMGs) were introduced in 2007, and are endorsed by the UN General Assembly by **Resolution 62/217**. The SDMGs provide a non-binding set of mitigation measures, including deorbiting spent satellites within 25 years. The 2019 UN Long-Term Sustainability (LTS) Guidelines also provide a set of voluntary guidelines, such as advice on developing regulatory frameworks, transparency measures, and space vehicle design.

Commercial actors are also continuing to provide mitigation solutions, such as through satellite life-extension and on-orbit servicing (OOS) and debris remediation, seen not least with Japan-based company, Astroscale. In 2025, the company carried its ADRAS-J mission, '...the world's first attempt to safely approach and characterize an existing piece of large debris through Rendezvous and Proximity Operations (RPO) and is the start of a full-fledged debris removal service', which will be followed by ADRAS-J2, which will '...attempt to safely approach the same rocket body through RPO, obtain further images, then remove and deorbit the rocket body using in-house robotic arm technologies.' Astrocale have also recently secured a patent for 'fuel-free' capturing of erratic 'tumbling' objects, and has won an ESA contract to develop an In-Orbit Refurbishment and Upgrading Service (IRUS). Furthermore, a Swiss-based company, ClearSpace, has initiated work with ESA on its PRELUDE project, which is designed to utilise two small spacecraft in orbit to carry out complex manoeuvres, using '...highly accurate tracking and clever navigation systems that combine sensors and cameras, allowing them to move with complete freedom in every direction.' The mission is due to launch in 2027, and will be critical for testing OOS and ADR technologies.

Efforts by these commercial entities are a crucial step towards addressing the spiralling sustainability and environmental challenges in outer space. However, in parallel, there will need to be ongoing communications and discussions among all stakeholders, at fora such as the UN, to harmonise these approaches and create common frameworks for the future, on space debris, space traffic and mining space for all.

SPACE LAW REVIEW

Key terms: Board of Peace, International Law, Outer Space Treaty, Artemis Accords, UNOOSA, COPUOS, TCBMs, Executive Order, United Nations, Council of Europe.

International law amid a Shifting US Policy. Can Multilateralism Endure?

On 22 January 2026, President Donald Trump ratified his new 'Board of Peace' (BoP) at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos.[1] The initiative came as a result of a United Nations Security Council Resolution in November 2025, which called for the establishment of the BoP '...as a transitional administration with international legal personality that will set the framework, and coordinate funding for, the redevelopment of Gaza...', pursuant to Trump's 20-point Comprehensive Plan to end the conflict in Gaza.[2]

The BoP, as of writing, has gathered 26 State signatories so far, which includes: Pakistan, Belarus, Argentina, Egypt, Türkiye and the UAE, each reportedly having to pay a $1 billion entrance fee.[3] However, there have been noticeable objections. France noted that '...its founding text raises political and legal questions, particularly concerning its scope of application and its governance',[4] while the UK opted out of joining the BoP over concerns that Russia may be invited to sign.[5] Both States committed to the implementation of Resolution 2803.

Furthermore, China stepped back from the offer to access the BoP, instead recommitting to the United Nations system. While the US President announced the establishment of the Board, a leaked Draft of the BoP Charter was published online,[6] which suggests a much broader role for the Board, beyond that of the mandate of the Security Council Resolution, and provides the Chairman (Donald Trump), and the Executive Board of the BoP, sweeping executive powers. However, the President also commented at Davos that he intends to work alongside '...many others, including the United Nations', and that the UN continued to have '... tremendous potential...', which it has not properly utilised.[7]

This article will explore current dynamics and geopolitical developments in order to analyse the shifting state of international relations and the authority of international law. For the purposes of this Report, it will specifically examine how these political and legal tremors will impact international governance and cooperation in space. These upheavals within the world order come at a time when the space domain is rapidly gaining more strategic value, investment, and, perhaps most importantly, being equipped as a domain of defence. This research will strive to identify the critical threats to space governance, and also to provide recommendations on what can be applied to maintain trust and cooperation in an era of rapid political and technological change.

Fracturing Relations: a Test of International Cooperation at a Time of Profound Change

The leaked BoP Draft Charter provides some revealing insights into the role of the Board, despite it officially, as per the content of the UN Security Council Resolution, only being mandated to act within the remit of Gaza, and implementing the 'Comprehensive Plan'.[8] Firstly, Chapter I of the Draft declares the BoP to be '...an international organization that seeks to promote stability, restore dependable and lawful governance, and secure enduring peace in areas affected or threatened by conflict',[9] going beyond the mandate of the UN Resolution. Furthermore, Donald Trump shall serve as the Board's inaugural Chairman, a position which retains '...exclusive authority to create, modify, or dissolve subsidiary entities as necessary or appropriate to fulfill the Board of Peace's mission.'[10] Replacement of the Chairman may only occur '...following voluntary resignation or as a result of incapacity, as determined by a unanimous vote of the Executive Board...'[11]

It would then appear that the BoP strives to go beyond its temporary mandate, to establish a new intergovernmental organisation, rather than an international agreement on Gaza, and in providing Trump with an indefinite position as Chair, may threaten to deepen the politicisation of international relations, and take power away from collective decision-making. However, it

needs also be noted that the Charter does recognise the need to carry out its peace-building functions '...in accordance with international law...',[12] while US officials have argued that the Board is to be complementary to the UN where multilateral processes have stalled.[13] Either way, the BoP has proven to be a divisive issue within what is already a world of shifting international relations, geopolitical crises and strained alliances.

The Trump Administration's quest to acquire Greenland has created division among allies at a time when the BoP was ratified, and Trump made his invitations to international partners. Before his speech at Davos, the Administration were exploring a range of options for acquiring Greenland, which included 'unitising the US military',[14] which drew a sharp response from European leaders, and a joint statement by European NATO leaders stating that 'Greenland belongs to its people. It is for Denmark and Greenland, and them only, to decide on matters concerning Denmark and Greenland.'[15] European States sent troops for joint military exercises in Greenland,[16] while Trump responded with the threat of 25% additional tariffs on those States resisting US action on Greenland,[17] a threat which even saw the US disrupt relations with its close ally, the UK.[18]

Furthermore, the US has continued on its path of 'isolationism', since the beginning of the second Trump term. In January this year, President Trump issued an Executive Order titled 'Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States', which delivers on consultation delivered by the Secretary of State '...to conduct a review of all international intergovernmental organizations of which the United States is a member and provides any type of funding or other support, and all conventions and treaties to which the United States is a party, to determine which organizations, conventions, and treaties are contrary to the interests of the United States.'[19] This list is extensive, and includes bodies from the Council of Europe, international institutes and multiple UN bodies. Additionally, the US gave notice of its withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 24 January,[20] and also left the Paris Climate Agreement for the second time.[21]

This, then, all brings into question the remaining power and weight of multilateralism, particularly at a time of great change and upheaval, such as the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), geopolitical crises in Ukraine and Iran, and, of course, in the rapidly evolving domain of space. Rather than handle these matters in forums consisting of all nations, Trump may be defining a new era of 'great power competition', and as Goddard writes, seeing foreign relations '...much as he sees the worlds of real estate...but on a larger scale', where a select group of actors are in constant competition.[22] However, the Washington Post reports that declaring an expanded mandate for the BoP may have inadvertently generated renewed support for the UN system, with the UK re-emphasising the pivotal role of the UN, French

President Macron questioning its role beyond Gaza, and Spain stating that the BoP goes beyond the framework of the United Nations.[23]

The question this then raises, regarding outer space, is whether the future of space governance remains with multilateralism and international cooperation, or a new era of unilateral decision-making and executive leadership will define the future. These will be especially critical junctures to navigate, especially as space becomes strategically more valuable, particularly as a war-fighting domain.

Space Governance: United or Fragmented?

As of writing, the UN Committee On the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) Scientific and Technical Subcommittee (STSC) is holding its annual meeting in Vienna, Austria. The STSC convenes each year to provide '...input to the Committee (COPUOS) on the scientific and technical aspects of space activities, and on the aspects of international cooperation related to these activities',[24] while COPUOS itself was initially founded in 1958 within Resolution 1348, which sought to prevent the extension of national rivalries into space, and maintain the aim that '...that outer space should be used for peaceful purposes only'.[25] There is evidence, then, that COPUOS has endured as the central forum for discussions on international space governance, as it nears its seventieth anniversary. Firstly, COPUOS now consists of 104 members, one of the largest Committees in the United Nations.[26] Furthermore, in 2024, the Chinese Delegation to COPUOS described COPUOS as the '... intergovernmental multilateral platform with the widest participation in the peaceful uses of outer space,' which has '...kept abreast of the times, faithfully discharged its duties and played an important role in promoting global governance...'[27] Additionally, the Delegation of the European Union described the Committee as remaining '...unique platforms for international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space', and '...the main multilateral platforms for the development of international space law...'[28]

COPUOS then remains the central forum, evidenced by its growing membership and consensus regarding its role as the central platform of multilateral discussions. Speaking at this year's STSC, the US delegation also recognised COPUOS as the '...only committee of the General Assembly dealing exclusively with international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space...',[29] seemingly aligning leading space powers on their approach to the UN system in space governance.

The UN space treaties also provide insight into global harmonisation on space governance. 118 States are now Parties to the Outer Space Treaty (OST),[30] since the accession of Latvia in

May, 2025.[31] The OST also provides key provisions on multilateralism and the development of space law, in desiring to '...contribute to broad international co-operation in the scientific as well as the legal aspects of the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes'.[32] Furthermore, Article I calls for the use and exploration of outer space '...to be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries, irrespective of their degree of economic or scientific development...', and recognises outer space as a province of humankind.[33] In addition, Article IX requests that States '...shall be guided by the principle of co-operation and mutual assistance and shall conduct all their activities in outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies, with due regard to the corresponding interests of all other States Parties to the Treaty.' These two principles, then, can be interpreted as providing that space can be explored freely, and that freedom is extended to all States, and that use and exploration should not exclude that freedom to others.

Given that all leading space nations are Parties to the OST, and recognise COPUOS as the central forum, it would appear that these principles of multilateralism, cooperation and freedom of use of outer space reinforce the solidity of international space law and governance. The UN Pact for the Future, adopted in September 2024 to address future global sustainability challenges, also supports this thread. Action 56 of the Pact calls for strengthening '...international cooperation for the exploration and use of outer space...', while stating that '...the Outer Space Treaty must be recognized as the cornerstone of the international legal regime governing outer space activities,'[34] although the Pact remains a non-binding declaration.

However, other non-binding (or 'soft law') approaches could garner further multilateralism. The Artemis Accords, a US-led framework of '...Principles for Cooperation in the Civil Exploration and Use of the Moon, Mars, Comets, and Asteroids for Peaceful Purposes',[35] was, in fact, established during the first Trump Administration, and has so far gathered 61 State Signatories, which includes the notable signatures of the UK, India, France, Germany and Japan. The Accords consider '...the necessity of greater coordination and cooperation between and among established and emerging actors in space,' and affirm the importance of compliance with the OST and other foundational space treaties (not including the Moon Agreement). Furthermore, Section 1 outlines the purpose of the Accords is to '...establish a common vision via a practical set of principles...'[36]

However, it should be questioned to what degree the Accords represent a new approach to multilateralism. Bartóki-Gönczy and Nagy argue that the Accords could '...upset the existing legal regime of Outer Space, leading to its fragmentation by abandoning multilateralism',[37] while de Zwart and Lisk share that some States see the Accords as '...an attempt by the US to drive unilateral lawmaking.'[38] Chinese military and aerospace commentator, Song Zhongping,

has likened the Accords to '...an 'Enclosure Movement,' in pursuit of colonization and claiming sovereignty over the moon',[39] and Dmitry Rogozin, former head of Russia's space agency Roscosmos, described the framework as a proltical project, where 'America is in charge and everyone else must help and pay'.[40] Concerns may arise when inspecting the Accords more deeply. While Section 1 promotes the Accords as having a common purpose, it also seeks to do so '...with the intention of advancing the Artemis Program.'[41] Elements of the Accords may also contradict some interpretations of the OST. Before announcing the establishment of the frameworks, President Trump published an Executive Order (EO) in April 2020, on '... Encouraging International Support for the Recovery and Use of Space Resources.'[42] Firstly, the EO states that the US does not view outer space as a global commons, and furthermore declares that 'Americans should have the right to engage in commercial exploration, recovery, and use of resources in outer space, consistent with applicable law.'[43] This position then contradicts Article I of the OST, while Russia criticised the Accords on the exploitation of space resources, stating that unilateral will create fragmentation of international space law.[44]

Conclusion

There then appears to be a growing sense of friction surrounding new approaches to international space law and governance, perhaps perpetuated by the pace of innovation and a new geopolitical competition, questioning the efficacy of multilateralism in a new world defined by great power competition. Alternatively, one could argue that geopolitical crises can push States closer together, reinforcing the ultimate backstop of international law and the UN system. What may be needed, during times of great change, is compromise and sustained cooperation.

A case in point: the UN Long-Term Sustainability (LTS) Guidelines were adopted in 2019, as a means to provide a set of 21 voluntary guidelines used to maintain outer space as '...an operationally stable and safe environment that is maintained for peaceful purposes and open for exploration...'[45] The Guidelines were widely supported, but opposed by Russia, which proposed to add an additional seven guidelines, but these were rejected, while COPUOS works by consensus of adoption. This required discussion and compromise. This included agreeing on a compromise on a Russian request to create a new COPUOS STSC Working Group under the agenda item on the long-term sustainability of outer space activities.[46] This firstly proves how 'soft law' approaches can be more malleable and implemented at a quicker pace, but also how multilateralism can still function in the modern age.

But may it also be the case that multilateralism and cooperation need to coexist with a new era of 'great power competition', one which is defined by the emergence of rival superpowers

and a new multipolar global order. Ultimately, it will be the role of COPUOS and other intergovernmental platforms to sustain cooperation, even during rapidly shifting dynamics of global power.

Joseph Holden | Senior Strategist
10 February 2026

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www.anasda.de
@anasda_gmbh
@ANASDA
info@anasda.de

Anasda GmbH
Herzog-Carl-Str. 2
73760 Ostfildern
Germany

Research & Analysis - Joseph Holden
Project Supervisor - Ching-Te Yen

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