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Can China Still Win the Second Race to the Moon?

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NASA

After America's successful Moon flyby, the race for space is entering a new and more intense phase. Who will be the first to return to the lunar surface — the United States or China?

China is working intensively on a crewed lunar landing that, according to official plans, is to take place "before 2030." So far, all test missions have proceeded flawlessly. This has apparently unsettled NASA. In January, the new NASA administrator, Jared Isaacman, summoned Blue Origin and SpaceX and aligned them firmly behind the goal of returning Americans to the Moon.

construction of a lunar base. Until recently, Musk had argued that it was of secondary importance who would return to the Moon more than 50 years after the first landing; what mattered was who would reach Mars first.

Where does China stand today? In 2003, China completed its first manned spaceflight mission with Shenzhou 5, becoming the third nation, after the United States and the Soviet Union, to independently launch humans into space. Since then, it has achieved a series of impressive milestones. In 2019, Chang'e 4 became the first spacecraft to land on the far side of the Moon — a technically demanding mission requiring a relay satellite to maintain communication with Earth. More recently, Chang'e 6 returned nearly two kilograms of lunar material in June 2024, again from the lunar far side.

China's ambitions go far beyond the Moon. The Tianwen-3 mission aims to collect samples from Mars and return them to Earth for the first time in history. If successful, China could outpace the United States in achieving this milestone.

China is already the second-largest spacefaring nation after the United States. But focusing only on its state-led achievements misses a crucial development: the rise of a private space sector.

To understand this, one must first correct a widespread misconception. China is often described as a centrally planned “communist” economy. This is as misleading as describing the United States as purely capitalist. In reality, market reforms and privatization have been central to China's economic success.

This trend extends into the space sector. Until 2014, virtually all of China's space activities were conducted by the state. Reforms then opened the door to private investors, leading to the emergence of commercial space companies.

This development was, as one observer noted, “very much a response to the success of SpaceX.” The influence of SpaceX — and of Elon Musk — has been enormous. Every Starship launch, every Starlink deployment, and nearly every statement by Musk is followed with intense interest in China. There is a clear pattern: imitation, adaptation, catch-up, and finally overtaking.

developing reusable rockets, methane propulsion systems, and even long-term plans for asteroid mining.

Yet China's model differs from that of the United States. The boundary between state and private enterprise is often blurred. Many "private" firms maintain close ties to state-owned enterprises and depend on them for key technologies such as rocket engines. Government support — through subsidies, tax incentives, and access to launch facilities — is substantial.

This creates both opportunities and constraints. While state backing accelerates development, it also limits independence. Regulatory oversight can stifle innovation, and reliance on government support makes companies vulnerable to policy shifts.

More importantly, China's political system places limits on entrepreneurial autonomy. The experience of Jack Ma demonstrates the risks faced by even the most successful business leaders. It is difficult to imagine a figure like Elon Musk emerging in China — someone willing to risk billions on highly uncertain ventures.

And yet, China should not be underestimated. Its space industry has remarkable depth. While the United States leads at the top, China's strength lies in the breadth of its ecosystem. At lower tiers — fifth-, tenth-, or twentieth-ranked companies — Chinese firms are increasingly competitive.

The outcome of the new space race will not be decided by government programs. It will depend on innovation, risk-taking, and the degree of freedom granted to private enterprise.

The renowned space expert Greg Autry is right when he writes: "Winning the second space race is all about the private sector. We won't beat China in a competition of large governmental programs; commercial space is America's best weapon."

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