

# Space is becoming a global geopolitical theatre

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On March 5, Yuri Borisov, the head of Roscosmos, the Russian Space agency, made an interesting announcement that China and Russia are eager to build a nuclear power station on the Moon by 2033–2035. This it urges will help future settlements on the Moon.

Some news reports also suggested rising tension between the United States and Russia after it was reported that the Kremlin was developing an anti-satellite nuclear weapon. Russia denied such claims. Such rumours have, however, heightened fears about US' military preparedness in the event of such an attack.

The developments in Space technology are moving ahead at breathtaking speed and Space is fast emerging as a new arena where geopolitical rivalries and co-operations are being reflected.

The China-Russia co-operation is another facet which makes the study of Space interesting. Soviet Union/Russia was the first country to launch an artificial satellite in 1957, the Sputnik 1. This resulted in Space becoming a crucial frontier of the Cold War with both the US and the Soviet Union vying for supremacy. However, the US emerged as the undisputed leader.

Today, China can boast of a much developed and ambitious Space programme. Chinese have undertaken feats like the spacewalk, ASAT test, a successful space station, and successfully conducted three unmanned lunar missions. The Chinese also want to undertake a manned lunar mission by 2030.

The Long March is one of the most successful launch vehicles and the Chinese aim to undertake 100 Space launches in 2024. China is also set to work on the Moon samples and rocks which it brought back in 2020. The BeiDou navigation system is also up and running, and has been made available to countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's Space budget stands at \$~13 billion and has achieved remarkable success. This is also because Space success has been perceived as necessary in making China great power, and has the full support of the government.

No surprises here then that Russia is keen to co-operate with China. In 2023, after 47 years, Moscow launched its Moon mission. The Luna-25 spacecraft, however, crashed underscoring the steady decline of Russia in Space. In an interview, Mikhail Marov, a leading Soviet physicist and astronomer, said, "This was perhaps the last hope for me to see a revival of our lunar program". Once a Space leader, Moscow is now ready to play second fiddle to Beijing, and is looking for opportunities to bandwagon to regain lost glory in Space.

China-Russia Space co-operation is an indicator of the existing power dynamics between the countries. Today, China is the pioneer and leader in Space technology with multiple success, and has established itself as the sole challenger to the US. Moscow, after facing consistent failures and limited budget and sanctions, is aware of the need for a vibrant Space programme, and understands that the only alternative it has to stay relevant is aligning with Beijing.

China and the US cannot collaborate due to the Wolf Amendment of 2011. This has resulted in growing closeness between India and the US. The US is also keen to reinvent its Space programme, and has been facing a few glitches to its Moon missions. It has plans to undertake a manned lunar mission by 2025.

New Delhi also has strong Space ambitions, and is keen to make a footprint. To achieve this, New Delhi has increased its Space spending to \$3 billion and has been encouraging the private sector too. New Delhi has also announced that it will undertake 30 Space launches in 2024-2025. India has joined the Artemis Accord and hopes to co-operate with the US in Space exploration and visit to the International Space Station (ISS). With successful unmanned lunar missions and becoming the only country to land on the south pole of the Moon, New Delhi is a good collaborator for the US.

Space is the next prominent sphere of great power projections and geopolitical rivalries. Chinese success in Space is making it a global leader and challenger. What makes Space so coveted is that it is not only crucial for military advancement but also for civilian aspects. No one can undermine the centrality of Space in helping in reconnaissance, but they are equally essential for day-to-day movement of the people, disaster management, and even entertainment. In addition, Space economy is projected to be a \$600 billion economy by 2025, and every country wants a share of it.

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