



Written by [James Murphy](#) on March 27, 2019

Pence Announces Plan to Return America to the Moon by 2024

Since December of 1972 when Apollo 17 astronauts Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt blasted off the lunar surface in the Lunar Module's ascent stage, the Moon has been uninhabited. On Tuesday, [Vice-President Mike Pence told](#) an appreciative crowd at the National Space Council's (NSC) fifth meeting in Huntsville, Alabama, that it is now official U.S. government policy to return America to the Moon by 2024, just five years away.



Since December of 2017 when President Trump signed Space Directive 1, NASA had been shooting for a 2028 return to the lunar surface, but Pence, citing a new space race with China and Russia, didn't think that was good enough. "We're better than that," Pence said.

"I'm here on the president's behalf, to tell the men and women of the Marshall Space Flight Center and the American people, that at the direction of the President of the United States, it is the stated policy of this Administration and the United States of America to return American astronauts to the Moon within the next five years."

The vice-president lamented that during the last few administrations, space exploration was placed on the back burner of American priorities. Ever since the space shuttle program ended in 2011 and the [Constellation Program](#) was cancelled in 2009, American space exploration has languished. Even when we send astronauts to the International Space Station, we've relied on other countries' rockets — predominantly Russia's at the cost of \$80 million per seat — to boost them into space.

But complacency in space is no longer an option, according to Pence. "Let me be clear. The first woman and the next man on the Moon will both be American astronauts, launched by Americans rockets on American soil."

It's an ambitious plan, and to accomplish it will take an "all-hands-on-deck-approach," according to Pence. And "all hands" could include private space companies such as Space-X to create the vehicles and technology we will need to accomplish these new feats.

"To accomplish this, we must redouble our efforts," Pence said. "We must focus on the mission over the means. We must consider every available option and platform to meet our goals, including industry, government and the entire American space enterprise."

"If American Industry can provide critical commercial services without government development then we'll buy them. And if commercial rockets are the only way to get American astronauts to the Moon in the next five years, then commercial rockets it will be."

The new generation of lunar missions won't be simply planting flags and collecting rocks. Future plans include a permanent base on the lunar surface, probably near the Moon's south pole, where water in the form of ice is present in perpetually shadowed craters. In addition to a permanent presence on the



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lunar surface, plans are in the works to create a Moon-orbiting space station called the [Lunar Gateway](#), which will act as a jumping off point for future manned and robotic sorties to the lunar surface. Construction on the Gateway is expected to begin in 2022.

Also, in concert with the lunar missions, NASA will be developing new technologies that will allow a mission to Mars in the coming decades.

President Trump seems to want to have a space-faring legacy associated with his presidency. He has signed Space Policy Directive 1, which calls for the return trips to the Moon as a pathway for future excursions to Mars. In May of 2018, he issued Space Policy Directive 2, which looks to streamline regulations in the commercial use of space. Space Policy Directive 3, signed in June of 2018, instructed NASA to come up with a space traffic management policy.

And Space Policy Directive 4 establishes a new branch of the American armed forces: the Space Force.

It's legitimate to ask if any of this is necessary. Do we really need a lunar mission? A Moon base? A science-fiction sounding Space Force? Don't we have serious problems to solve here on Earth?

But when Pence referenced a space race, he wasn't kidding. The former Soviet Union had an extremely aggressive space program, now called Roscosmos, the new Russian Space Agency, which has been America's primary space competitor for years. And now China has also emerged as a space-faring nation, becoming the [first nation to soft land](#) on the far side of the Moon and send back pictures. China is also busy building the [Long March](#) series of rockets, which will be able to carry large payloads into space.

So, the question as to whether America needs to do these things comes down to another question: Do we really want to cede space and its strategic and scientific possibilities to Russia and China?

From a constitutional standpoint, if there is a military necessity to have a Space Force to defend the United States from space-based aggression, then the federal government may do so. But as far as scientific and technological interests are concerned, private-sector space programs should be relied upon.

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