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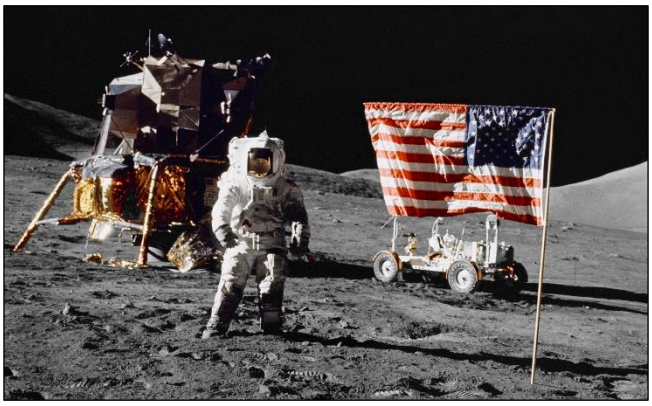
Updated December 5, 2024

Artemis: NASA's Program to Return Humans to the Moon

Between 1969 and 1972, the Apollo program of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) landed 12 American men on the Moon and returned them safely to Earth (see **Figure 1**). Since then, no human has been farther from Earth than low-Earth orbit, a few hundred miles up; the distance to the Moon is about 240,000 miles. Artemis, named for Apollo's twin sister in ancient Greek mythology, is NASA's program for a return to the Moon by American astronauts—one of them a woman—in 2026.

Figure 1. The Last Human Lunar Mission: Apollo 17



Source: NASA, https://www.nasa.gov/image-detail/amf-as17-134-20382/.

Note: This image shows Apollo 17 astronaut Harrison Schmitt standing on the surface of the Moon on December 13, 1972. Behind him are the Lunar Module lander and the Lunar Roving Vehicle rover.

Orion and the Space Launch System

Artemis has evolved from plans initiated in the NASA Authorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-267). The act established a statutory goal of "expand[ing] permanent human presence beyond low-Earth orbit" and mandated the development of a crew capsule and a heavy-lift rocket to accomplish that goal. The capsule, now known as Orion, and the rocket, known as the Space Launch System (SLS), have been in development since then (see **Figure 2**).

Each Orion capsule consists of a crew module with room for four to six astronauts as well as storage space and a docking port; a service module (contributed by the European Space Agency) to provide power and propulsion; and a launch abort system. The crew module is the only portion intended to return to Earth at the end of a mission; it is designed to be reusable.

The SLS is an expendable rocket designed to carry Orion into space and set it on its initial trajectory. The SLS could also potentially be used for other missions involving heavy payloads or requiring very high thrust. It is designed to be upgraded in stages (known as Block 1, Block 1B, and Block 2) by substituting improved versions of its major elements. For example, for Block 1B, NASA is developing the Exploration Upper Stage to replace the Block 1 upper stage, which is known as the Interim Cryogenic Propulsion Stage.

In December 2014, a partially complete Orion was launched on a Delta IV Heavy rocket and orbited Earth twice before splashing down in the Pacific Ocean. This uncrewed mission tested the crew module's heat shield and parachutes, as well as other systems.

The first launch of Orion on an SLS was in November 2022. During this mission, known as Artemis I, a complete but uncrewed Orion orbited the Moon before returning to Earth. The mission was designed to provide the data NASA needs to certify safety for crewed flights.

Artemis II, the first crewed test of Orion and the SLS, is expected in April 2026. During this 10-day mission, Orion and its crew of four are to fly around the Moon at an altitude of about 4,000 miles before returning to Earth.

The Artemis III mission, planned for mid-2027, is to include the first human Moon landing since 1972. Achieving that goal would require the development of other systems, such as a lunar lander.

Subsequent Artemis missions, with more lunar landings and various additional capabilities, are planned approximately every year starting in 2028.

Human Landing System

The Orion capsule is not designed to land on the Moon. Instead, for Artemis III and subsequent lunar surface missions, astronauts will need to transfer to a separate spacecraft, known as a Human Landing System (HLS), for lunar descent and ascent (see **Figure 2**). In April 2021, NASA selected SpaceX to provide an HLS as a commercial service starting with Artemis III. In May 2023, it awarded a second HLS contract to Blue Origin to provide an alternative to the SpaceX system starting with Artemis V (planned for 2029). Both systems are still in development.

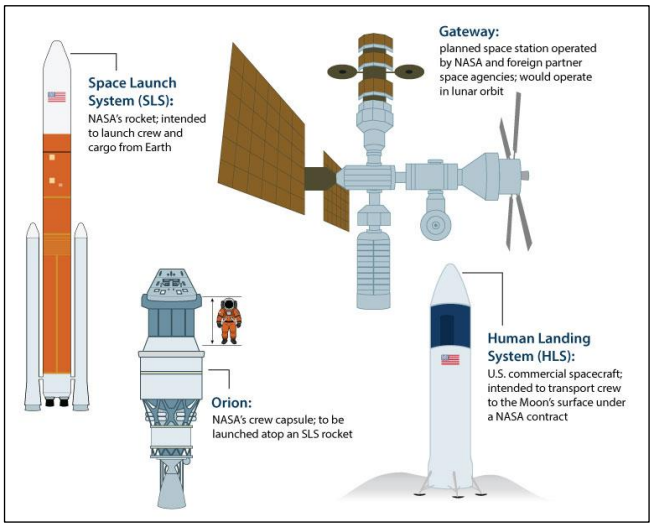
Gateway

To facilitate Artemis lunar landings and other missions, NASA is developing a modular platform, known as Gateway, to be placed in a permanent orbit around the Moon (see **Figure 2**). The first two Gateway modules—the Power and Propulsion Element (PPE) and the Habitation and Logistics Outpost (HALO, a pressurized habitat for astronauts)—are currently in development, with launch planned in 2026.

Gateway is intended to serve as a depot for storing supplies, a platform for science experiments, a location where subsystems launched separately can be assembled and integrated, and a rendezvous point where astronauts can transfer between Orion and the HLS and potentially, at some point in the future, depart for Mars. NASA initially

planned for Gateway to be the Orion-HLS transfer point for the Artemis III lunar landing. It is no longer part of the plans for Artemis III, but it is to be used for subsequent missions starting with Artemis IV (planned for 2028).

Figure 2. Major Elements of the Artemis Missions



Source: CRS illustration based on NASA websites.

Other Elements

In addition to Orion, SLS, HLS, and Gateway, NASA is planning robotic missions to demonstrate new technologies and explore potential landing sites, developing new spacesuits, and developing technologies for lunar surface power, in situ use of lunar resources such as water, and other lunar surface systems such as rovers and habitats for missions after Artemis III.

Issues for Congress

As Congress oversees the progress of the Artemis program and acts on NASA authorization and appropriations legislation, it may address issues such as the schedule for the first landing, cost concerns for the program as a whole, the relative exploration priority of the Moon versus Mars, and the role of the commercial space sector.

Schedule

As recently as early 2019, NASA was planning the first post-Apollo human lunar landing for 2028. An acceleration to 2024 was announced by Vice President Pence in March 2019. Supporters of the 2024 goal argued that it instilled a sense of urgency, focus, and motivation, and that the U.S. space program is in competition with Russia and China. Opponents argued that the 2024 date was driven by political goals rather than by technical or scientific considerations. Congress deliberated questions such as what geopolitical or other benefits a 2024 landing might bring; how providing the funding needed to achieve a 2024 landing might affect the availability of funding for other NASA programs; how schedule pressure might influence safety decisions; and how design choices made to meet the 2024 deadline might affect system reusability for subsequent NASA human exploration missions.

NASA's schedule for Artemis III (and subsequent Artemis missions) has since slipped several times, less due to these policy debates than to development challenges. As of December 5, 2024, NASA estimated that Artemis III would launch mid-2027.

Budget

According to a January 2024 Government Accountability Office report, NASA had not yet estimated the cost of the Artemis III mission or subsequent Artemis missions. Likewise, NASA "does not plan to measure the production costs for the SLS rockets that constitute a significant proportion of future Artemis-related costs." Absent more information on long-term costs, Congress typically makes budget decisions on an annual basis. The FY2025 request for Artemis systems is $7.6 billion.

Moon or Mars?

Is returning to the Moon the primary goal for human space exploration, or is it an interim step to gain experience for future expeditions to Mars? While this distinction is to some extent a matter of emphasis, the debate continues. For example, the NASA Authorization Act of 2020 (H.R. 5666, 116th Congress) would have stated that "the Nation's human space exploration goal should be to send humans to the surface of Mars," although "reducing the risk and demonstrating the capabilities and operations needed to support a human mission to Mars may require human exploration of the cis-lunar vicinity [i.e., the region around the Moon and between Earth and the Moon] and lunar surface." This debate may drive how Artemis missions are planned (e.g., whether lunar habitats are designed to be permanent and whether potential reuse for Mars missions is a major factor in technology choices for lunar missions).

Role of the Commercial Space Sector

In recent years, NASA has placed growing emphasis on procuring services from the commercial space industry. For example, where it used to use NASA-owned space shuttles to carry cargo and crews to the International Space Station, it now buys cargo and crew transport as a commercial service on commercially owned spacecraft.

Orion and the SLS are being developed as NASA-owned systems, but the HLS is to be provided as a commercial service, and several Artemis-related robotic missions are being conducted through the Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) initiative. Not all stakeholders support the commercial approach. For example, in January 2024, former NASA Administrator Michael D. Griffin testified that the emphasis on commercial services is "the fundamental flaw in the Artemis acquisition approach." The NASA Authorization Act of 2022 directed that Artemis human landing missions are to be "carried out solely by government astronauts" (P.L. 117-167, §10811).

Acknowledgments. Former CRS Specialist Daniel Morgan wrote the original version of this product.

Rachel Lindbergh, Analyst in Science and Technology Policy

IF11643

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