



Cover Photo: NASA

# Artemis Rewritten: NASA's New Moon Plan, Its Risks, and Whether the U.S. Can Still Beat China

BY Shreya Chandra

**In early 2026**, NASA made a consequential change to the Artemis program: Artemis III was no longer planned as a crewed lunar landing mission. Instead, Artemis III had been changed to a low Earth Orbit (LEO) demonstration flight that would test integrated operations between the Orion spacecraft and one or both commercial lunar landers being developed by SpaceX and Blue Origin. Under the new architecture, the first crewed lunar landing shifts to Artemis IV, now targeted for 2028.<sup>1</sup> NASA also added an extra mission to increase launch cadence, standardized the early Space Launch System (SLS) configuration, and publicly embraced a more aggressive long-term goal of building a permanent lunar base under its new “Ignition” initiative.

This schedule change aims to reduce technical and operational risks during the lunar landing by first testing the human landing systems and conducting docking operations closer to Earth, before attempting such activities near the Moon. But this change also introduces new risks.

*Shreya Chandra was a research intern with the Aerospace Security Project (ASP) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. This piece was produced as part of ASP's internship program supporting emerging space professionals. For more information on ASP's internship program, see <https://careers.csis.org/internships>.*

The central question now is whether this restructuring improves America's odds of returning astronauts to the Moon before China by acknowledging and attempting to mitigate risks that were a part of the original plan.



Artemis II / NASA

### Q1: What is Artemis?

**A1:** Artemis is NASA's current human lunar exploration program, intended to return astronauts to the Moon for the first time since Apollo while establishing the foundation for a sustained U.S. presence in cislunar space and on the lunar surface. Unlike Apollo, which relied on a relatively self-contained government-developed mission architecture,

Artemis is built around a distributed system of government and commercial elements that must operate together across multiple missions. Its core components include the SLS, which launches crews from Earth; the Orion spacecraft, which carries astronauts into deep space; commercial Human Landing Systems (HLS), which are intended to transport crews between lunar orbit and the surface of the Moon; and a broader set of supporting systems that include lunar surface spacesuits, logistics delivery, and

communications infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Earlier iterations of Artemis also relied heavily on the Lunar Gateway, a planned space station in lunar orbit (bolstered by international collaboration) intended to support crew staging and longer-term cislunar operations.<sup>3</sup>

In principle, this architecture is designed to support a repeatable campaign that can evolve into sustained lunar operations and eventually support preparation for Mars. In practice, however, Artemis is far more operationally complex than Apollo, and that complexity is central to both its strategic value and its repeated delays.

### Q2: What is NASA changing with Artemis?

**A2:** The most immediate change is mission sequencing. Artemis III is now a test mission in LEO planned for 2027, not a lunar landing. NASA says the mission will launch

astronauts aboard Orion on SLS and use that crewed flight to rehearse rendezvous and docking operations with the HLS being developed by SpaceX and, potentially, Blue Origin.<sup>4</sup> The point is to validate the integrated interfaces between NASA's crew vehicle and the private landers before attempting a real lunar descent.

---

In practice, however, Artemis is far more operationally complex than Apollo, and that complexity is both central to its strategic value and its repeated delays.

---

That pushes the first Moon landing to Artemis IV in 2028.<sup>5</sup> NASA has also added an additional Artemis mission to increase launch cadence and says it intends to pursue at least one Artemis mission per year after 2027.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it is standardizing the SLS configuration rather than transitioning to a more complex upper stage variant, a move meant to simplify production and improve flight tempo. NASA explained this as creating a more repeatable campaign as opposed

to treating each Artemis launch like a custom one-off event.

Then came the bigger shift. At its March 2026 Ignition event, NASA unveiled a broader strategic pivot away from the long-emphasized Lunar Gateway orbital station and toward a direct-to-lunar surface infrastructure model.<sup>7</sup> NASA announced a phased plan to spend roughly \$30 billion over seven years building a permanent lunar base, with early phases focused on robotic buildup and technology demonstrations, followed by initial infrastructure emplacement, and eventually long-duration crewed occupation.<sup>8</sup> NASA is effectively canceling Gateway as the centerpiece of the architecture and redirecting resources toward surface systems.

### **Q3: What is this change aiming to fix?**

**A3:** The new plan is trying to solve three problems: technical risks, schedule fluctuations, and architectural inefficiency.

First, the original Artemis III mission attempted to combine too many firsts into a single flight. It would have required Orion crew operations in deep space, a successful rendezvous with Starship HLS in lunar orbit, confidence in a commercial lander architecture not yet fully demonstrated, lunar descent and ascent, and surface extravehicular activity (EVA) systems (all on the first crewed landing mission). NASA's decision to turn Artemis III into a LEO integration test strongly suggests the agency no longer believes that such a stack of first-time events is prudent. It is separating interface validation from the landing itself in a return to an Apollo-style incremental test philosophy.

Second, the new plan is trying to address Artemis' glacial cadence. For years, the program has suffered from long gaps between missions because SLS, Orion, and supporting ground infrastructure have effectively

been treated as bespoke hardware. NASA's move to standardize the early SLS configuration is meant to reduce disruption, simplify integration, and allow launches on a more annual basis. If that works, it could make Artemis feel less like a demonstration program and more like an operational campaign.



Lunar South Pole Illustration / NASA

Third, the shift away from Gateway reflects a growing recognition that an orbital station does not put boots on the Moon.<sup>9</sup> Gateway may still have strategic value, especially for international cooperation and logistics, but it adds complexity, cost, and dependencies. Repurposing its architecture allows for a prioritization of surface systems (e.g., robotic landers, mobility assets, power, construction, and eventually habitation). If the objective has moved beyond flags and footprints to a durable presence, NASA is now arguing that money should go where the permanence actually happens—on the lunar surface.

### **Q4: What are the risks from this new plan?**

**A4:** The revised architecture is more rational than the old one, but it is still risky. It also risks upsetting international partners, who have made significant investments in the old plan, even if the revision is technically clearer.

The new plan still depends heavily on commercial landers that are behind schedule. NASA's LEO demonstration for Artemis III reduces immediate

mission risk, but it does not eliminate the core dependency on SpaceX's Starship HLS and Blue Origin's Blue Moon systems.<sup>10</sup> NASA now plans to proceed with whichever lander is ready first, which sounds pragmatic yet underscores how uncertain the schedule remains. If neither vehicle is ready on time, the restructured sequence simply becomes a better-organized delay.

Abandoning or sidelining Gateway may create international and contractual turbulence. Gateway has been a major anchor point for partnership with allies such as Japan, Canada, and the European Space Agency.<sup>11</sup> Reallocating that architecture toward a surface base may be strategically sensible, but it can strain diplomatic commitments, complicate industrial work already underway, and trigger political backlash from stakeholders whose hardware was built around the original concept. Uncertainty abounds regarding international partner roles after the shift.

The third risk is budget realism. NASA's \$30 billion moon base plan is bold, but seven years is a very aggressive horizon for building even a modest sustained outpost on the Moon. Several reports emphasize that the "base" will be phased, which likely means an initial foothold rather than a fully mature settlement.<sup>12</sup> In practice, this is likely to be a small early surface node with power, cargo, and repeat access. The envisioned sprawling lunar colony is still years out. If expectations are not managed, the plan could become vulnerable to the same overpromising that already hurt Artemis.

It appears NASA is trying to accelerate and simplify at the same time. That is the right instinct, but these goals can conflict. More missions, faster cadence, annual landing, surface infrastructure, and a moon base all

sound coherent on paper. In execution, they create a larger program surface area with more points of failure.

### **Q5: Can the United States still beat China back to the Moon?**

**A5:** Yes, the United States can still be first to return astronauts to the lunar surface, but the strategic significance of that outcome has diminished. In the current environment, first arrival is not the decisive metric. Sustained access is.

NASA's recent Artemis shuffle suggests the agency is beginning to recognize that distinction. A lunar return that cannot be repeated at a useful cadence offers limited geopolitical value, particularly if China follows with a more stable and expandable architecture. The more consequential question is whether the United States can translate a first landing into a durable presence supported by regular logistics, surface infrastructure, and operational continuity. If Artemis produces only a symbolic near-term success, while China develops a more repeatable model, then the United States may win the first milestone while conceding the longer-term strategic advantage.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank Kari Bingen, Clayton Swope, and Christina Nordby for their support and insights.

## About CSIS

---

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization dedicated to advancing practical ideas to address the world's greatest challenges.

Thomas J. Pritzker was named chairman of the CSIS Board of Trustees in 2015, succeeding former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA). Founded in 1962, CSIS is led by John J. Hamre, who has served as president and chief executive officer since 2000.

CSIS's purpose is to define the future of national security. We are guided by a distinct set of values—nonpartisanship, independent thought, innovative thinking, cross-disciplinary scholarship, integrity and professionalism, and talent development. CSIS's values work in concert toward the goal of making real-world impact.

CSIS scholars bring their policy expertise, judgment, and robust networks to their research, analysis, and recommendations. We organize conferences, publish, lecture, and make media appearances that aim to increase the knowledge, awareness, and salience of policy issues with relevant stakeholders and the interested public.

CSIS has impact when our research helps to inform the decision making of key policymakers and the thinking of key influencers. We work toward a vision of a safer and more prosperous world.

CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> NASA, “NASA Adds Mission to Artemis Lunar Program, Updates Architecture,” NASA.gov, February 27, 2026, <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-adds-mission-to-artemis-lunar-program-updates-architecture/>.

<sup>2</sup> NASA, “Artemis,” NASA.gov, <https://www.nasa.gov/humans-in-space/artemis/>.

<sup>3</sup> NASA, “NASA Marks Artemis Progress with Gateway Lunar Space Station,” NASA.gov, March 14, 2024, <https://www.nasa.gov/missions/artemis/nasa-marks-artemis-progress-with-gateway-lunar-space-station/>.

<sup>4</sup> Irene Klotz, “NASA Adds Lunar Lander LEO Docking Demo to Artemis Campaign,” Aviation Week, February 27, 2026, <https://aviationweek.com/space/operations-safety/nasa-adds-lunar-lander-leo-docking-demo-artemis-campaign>.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Ducker, “NASA Artemis Mission Changes 2028 Moon Landing SLS,” Axios, March 16, 2026, <https://www.axios.com/local/huntsville/2026/03/16/nasa-artemis-mission-changes-2028-moon-landing-sls>.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Berger, “NASA Shakes Up Its Artemis Program to Speed Up Lunar Return,” Ars Technica, February 27, 2026, <https://arstechnica.com/space/2026/02/nasa-shakes-up-its-artemis-program-to-speed-up-lunar-return/>.

<sup>7</sup> NASA, “NASA Unveils Initiatives to Achieve America’s National Space Policy,” NASA.gov, March 24, 2026, <https://www.nasa.gov/news-release/nasa-unveils-initiatives-to-achieve-americas-national-space-policy/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Daleo, “NASA’s \$30B Plan to Build a Moon Base,” Astronomy.com, March 25, 2026, <https://www.astronomy.com/space-exploration/nasas-30b-plan-to-build-a-moon-base/>.

<sup>9</sup> ScienceAlert Staff, “NASA Abandons Its Ambitious Lunar Space Station in Major Shake-Up,” ScienceAlert.com, March 26, 2026, <https://www.sciencealert.com/nasa-abandons-its-ambitious-lunar-space-station-in-major-shake-up>.

<sup>10</sup> NASA Office of Inspector General, “Artemis Lander Program Faces Schedule Delays and Unmitigated Crew Safety Risks,” Oig.nasa.gov, March 10, 2026, <https://oig.nasa.gov/news/artemis-lander-program-faces-schedule-delays-and-unmitigated-crew-safety-risks/>.

<sup>11</sup> European Space Agency, “Gateway,” ESA.int, [https://www.esa.int/Science\\_Exploration/Human\\_and\\_Robotic\\_Exploration/Exploration/Gateway](https://www.esa.int/Science_Exploration/Human_and_Robotic_Exploration/Exploration/Gateway).

<sup>12</sup> Eric Berger, “NASA Kills Lunar Space Station to Focus on Ambitious Moon Base,” Ars Technica, March 24, 2026, <https://arstechnica.com/space/2026/03/nasa-kills-lunar-space-station-to-focus-on-ambitious-moon-base/>; Innovation News Network, “NASA Outlines Phased Moon Base Strategy,” <https://www.innovationnewsnetwork.com/nasa-outlines-phased-moon-base-strategy/68109/>; and NASASpaceflight Staff, “NASA Moon Base Pivots Gateway,”

<https://www.google.com/search?q=Nasaspaceflight.com>, March 24, 2026, <https://www.nasaspaceflight.com/2026/03/nasa-moon-base-pivots-gateway/>.