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Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power Policy Report: Unpacking China's Space Diplomacy and Global Ambitions

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"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there-on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

- Carl Sagan, Pale Blue Dot, 1994

Executive Summary

China's expanding space program presents a growing but still developing challenge for the United States, as it seeks to position itself as a leading actor in global space exploration by offering not only satellite access but also launch services and partnerships to developing countries. While China has made significant progress, its own official policy documents frame its ambition as achieving parity with leading space powers by 2040. It is not yet materially ahead of the United States in overall capacity or output. Nevertheless, China is presenting an alternative normative framework for governing space exploration, though it has not entirely broken with existing multilateral institutions.

China's approach draws on an integrated mix of hard, soft, and smart power. At the hard power level, it develops dual-use technologies with significant military implications. At the soft power level, it frames partnerships as South-South cooperation, appealing to nations historically excluded from Western-led initiatives. At the smart power level, these dimensions reinforce one another, translating technological relationships into diplomatic coalition-building within the institutions that will set the rules of the space for decades to come.

What is at stake is not only technological competition but also the ability to shape the norms and institutional frameworks that will define how the international community accesses and uses space in the future. If current trends continue, the United States may face increasing

competition from China across key space technologies and among emerging space nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This report examines these dynamics through the lens of hard, soft, and smart power, offering policy recommendations to help the United States maintain leadership while promoting a stable and cooperative space environment.

Introduction

The contemporary strategic competition in space between the United States and China reflects a broader transformation of space into a domain of strategic competition that is simultaneously technological, economic, and political. The US retains significant advantages, including a robust commercial space sector, global alliances, and leadership in innovation, while China has rapidly closed the gap through sustained state investment, centralized coordination, and long-term strategic planning. As a result, this competition is unfolding in an increasingly complex, multipolar environment, with new non-governmental actors, such as private companies, playing important roles. Critically, this competition between the U.S. and China is not only about achieving technological goals, but also about shaping the infrastructure, partnerships, and governance frameworks that will define how the international community accesses and uses space in the future — and crucially, who gets to set the rules for that access.

In this policy brief, we present a set of policy recommendations to the Office of Space Affairs within the United States Department of State, following an academic review of key challenges and opportunities that may inform a broad strategy. These recommendations are developed through three complementary analytical lenses of hard, soft, and smart power, which structure the analysis of this document and provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the evolving dynamics of space competition with China. Hard power relies on military and economic coercion, soft power operates through attraction and legitimacy, and smart power combines both. Understanding how these three dimensions operate separately and in combination is essential for crafting a response that is both effective and sustainable in an increasingly multipolar space environment.

Space Diplomacy

Diplomacy is soft power's most fundamental tool for achieving its objectives. In particular, space diplomacy concerns how actors in international relations negotiate. For the U.S., space diplomacy takes the form of negotiation and cooperation with other countries for:

1. Guaranteeing a peaceful use of space
2. Negotiating norms and treaties on space
3. Preventing conflict in space

Space diplomacy originated in the early 'Space Age' (1950s-1960s) during the U.S.- Soviet Union rivalry, leading to foundational agreements, such as the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which set the norms for peaceful activities and non-sovereignty in space. It evolved in the post-Cold War era and into the 21st century with new diplomatic initiatives and multilateral frameworks. Thus, it primarily plays out in international fora and institutions, especially the United Nations and its specialized committees, where nations negotiate and adopt space treaties and cooperative frameworks. Space diplomacy is necessary for several reasons. (1) To govern a new global common: Space is treated as a shared domain requiring international coordination on issues such as debris mitigation, resource use, and traffic management and safety. (2) To advance the peaceful, open, and cooperative use of space by negotiating norms and treaties to reduce militarization and prevent conflict in space. (3) To facilitate joint scientific missions, data sharing, and shared goals (Polkowska, 2020).

What is at Stake?

The Physical and Material: Satellites and Dual Use Technologies

China's investment in space-based dual-use technology enables its military apparatus to raise the threat of China in the near future, challenging the United States in the space domain. This would give China a range of unique capabilities that pose various threats. China has cultivated the capability to destroy and degrade adversary satellites through physical means (Department of Defense, 2023). This capability could allow China to cripple enemy satellites and effectively control the space environment. A Chinese monopoly over international satellite infrastructure would shift the military balance of power heavily in China's favor. China could disrupt or degrade an adversary's satellite systems in a conflict. A disruption of satellite systems could significantly affect U.S. military operations (Jennings 2022, 21). The U.S. military relies on satellite infrastructure at every

stage of its operational kill chain, from locating and tracking targets to guiding munitions and assessing results, making that infrastructure a critical and vulnerable dependency.

If China were to strike American satellites before mounting an attack on American allies like Taiwan or Australia, America's ability to Orient, Observe, Decide, and Act (OODA) would be greatly degraded. The OODA loop is the foundational mechanism by which the American military determines what actions to take and how to take them. The concept of degrading the American OODA loop cycle is foundational to Chinese strategic doctrine (Ellis et al., 2024). Without an expedient way for the U.S. to OODA loop, it would, at best, briefly lose initiative. At worst, the U.S. could lose the war for Taiwan before it started.

China is also building the capability to operate Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite constellations, such as Starlink (Wang, Smith, and Garafola 2025). A Starlink-capable China would enable it to project greater hard and soft power, especially in influence. China could establish and provide an internet network entirely separate from any international engagement with its allies. This capability could enable China to completely control the flow of information, giving it free reign over narratives throughout the allies. A Starlink-capable China could also degrade American global capabilities by providing American adversaries, whether small groups or nations, with an ISR capability that either matches or eclipses American capabilities. Internationally, this could enable groups like the Houthis, IRGC, or Russian military to punch above their weight and damage or cripple international American assets, naval or otherwise (Jayanti, 2023).

Agenda Setting: Rules, Norms, and Access

When considering what is at stake, it is not only about material and military advantages in space, but also the ability to establish norms, rules, and expectations for behavior in the space domain. For example, there is a competition to attract the development of In-Space infrastructure, which enables us not only to travel to space but also to stay and conduct research and exploration there. However, this competition highlights a more critical point. The country or coalition that leads in developing this space infrastructure will be better positioned to set the agenda for future space projects that depend on it. Here, infrastructure acts as a mechanism of access. By granting or denying access to this infrastructure, the controlling country or coalition can influence the programs and objectives pursued. Consequently, future research outputs, initiatives, and programs seeking funding will tend to align with these nations' infrastructure development efforts to secure approval to use their facilities. This means that future space research and exploration agendas will be shaped by the concept of access to in-space infrastructure and by the countries that design and control it. Therefore, the U.S. government should aim to lead or join a coalition to develop this foundational in-space infrastructure, as it will also influence how access shapes the future of space projects.

This becomes an even more critical point when considering in-space resources and their allocation. Beyond direct research projects, the moon could be mined and utilized just as Earth has exploited its essential resources. These in-space resources will be vital for maintaining a long-term presence in space, on the moon, or other space bodies, and for constructing semi-permanent structures. Therefore, being the first to arrive can allow a nation to try to claim territory and set rules about what can and cannot be used on the moon, as well as how resources are shared. Here, the advantage of being the first mover increases this risk, since the country that establishes its bases on the moon first can influence long-term surface control. Such actions might pollute other resources without considering other countries' projects or could claim all resource-rich areas across the lunar surface before others have a chance to build their infrastructure and access those resources. For the U.S., that means ensuring that it establishes clear rules for the use of lunar resources with allies and partners before first movers set harmful precedents through their own projects.

Navigating these developments that influence agenda setting will shape how countries develop space partnerships with different institutions and nations, encouraging the integration of nations into new frameworks of collaboration and norms of engagement. Here, China has been active in integrating the Global South into its International Lunar Research Station, Space Silk Road, and ByteDance systems, which, through future integration and partnerships, will influence the institutional rules that guide these nations' approaches to space development and projects.

The same can be said for the United States' approach to the Artemis Accords. This idea of further-integrated space partnerships establishing norms for space collaboration is a familiar argument that China has been making about the Western-led world order since the development of the international system after WWII. It is important to note that space is on the precipice of a new system that will develop norms, rules, and access that mirror a similar critical juncture the international system faced after WWII. Therefore, countries like the United States must strengthen their integration of space partnerships with specific allies to shape institutional norms, rules, and access before China does so in ways that benefit it and disadvantage the United States for decades to come.

Background of China's Space Program and Global Ambitions

The history of space exploration is inseparable from the history of geopolitical competition. The origins of the modern space program stem from the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, which drove the U.S. space program from its earliest missions in 1958 through to the historic Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969. This period established space as a domain of strategic significance far beyond scientific exploration, a lesson that has shaped every major space power's approach since. The International Space Station (ISS), operational since 1998 and set to be decommissioned in 2030, became the defining model for multinational space cooperation in the post-Cold War era. However, this cooperation has always had limits. In 2011, the Wolf Amendment effectively banned NASA from bilateral cooperation with China, excluded it from the ISS, and set the stage for the parallel development of competing space programs.

China's rise as a space power has followed a deliberate and state-led trajectory. In 1970, China launched its first satellite, Dongfanghong-1, laying the foundation for a program rooted in national strategy rather than purely scientific ambition. In 2003, the Shenzhou 5 mission made China only the third nation in history to independently send a human to space, a milestone that signaled its emergence as a serious spacefaring power. By 2022, China had completed the Tiangong space station, establishing its own permanent orbital outpost and demonstrating a long-term commitment to maintaining a continuous human presence in space independent of Western-led initiatives.

The history of the U.S.-China space relations has been marked by alternating periods of cooperation and rupture. Between 1978 and 1999, the two countries engaged in limited but meaningful cooperation, including the launch of U.S. satellites by Chinese rockets. This relationship collapsed in 1999 following the Cox Report, which alleged that U.S. technology transfers had assisted China's military space program. A brief attempt at re-engagement through the Civil Space Dialogue between 2008 and 2011 demonstrated that narrow cooperation was possible but ultimately fragile. The Wolf Amendment of 2011 formalized this separation, and since then, the two countries have pursued increasingly parallel and competing visions for space; most visibly in the contrast between the U.S. Artemis program and the China-Russia International Lunar Research Station.

China's space program has expanded quickly over the last twenty years and now plays a key role in its national strategy. Chinese policy documents highlight space as vital for scientific progress, economic growth, and national security, while also supporting China's long-term aim of becoming a top global space power (State Council Information Office, 2022; Yeh & Horsfall, 2025). China has made significant progress in various areas of space activity. These include developing independent launch capabilities, completing the BeiDou global navigation satellite system, advancing Earth observation and communications satellites, and operating the Tiangong space station. China has also expanded its deep-space exploration efforts, including lunar and Mars missions, with plans for sustained human spaceflight and lunar infrastructure (State Council Information Office, 2022).

China's Space Diplomacy: Activities and Ambitions

China's space diplomacy is best understood as part of its broader ambition to become a leading global power by mid-century, with outer space serving as a critical domain for technological leadership, national prestige, and geopolitical influence. The Chinese State Council Information Office (SCIO) outlines a long-term vision extending to 2050, including advanced lunar exploration, potential resource utilization, Mars sample return missions, exploration of the Jupiter system, and sustained human spaceflight (SCIO,

2022). A key milestone within this trajectory is China's stated goal of achieving a crewed lunar landing by 2030, alongside plans to establish long-term infrastructure such as a research base at the Moon's south pole, potentially incorporating nuclear-powered energy systems (SCIO, 2022). These ambitions reflect not only scientific priorities but also the integration of space strategy into national security and broader power-projection capabilities, positioning space as a site of strategic competition with the United States.

China's space program has evolved quickly over the past two decades, which shows a deliberate effort to build comprehensive and independent capabilities across the space sector. Notably, China has developed its own launch systems, reducing reliance on foreign providers and enhancing strategic autonomy. The deployment of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System has provided China with a global positioning capability comparable to the U.S.-operated GPS, reinforcing both civilian and military applications (SCIO, 2022). In parallel, China has successfully executed a series of high-profile exploration missions, including the Chang'e lunar program and the Tianwen-1 Mars mission, as well as the construction and operation of the Tiangong space station. Collectively, these achievements underscore China's emergence as a long-term major actor in the global space economy and governance landscape (SCIO, 2022; Marshall, 2023).

Beyond capability development, China has also leveraged its space program as a tool of international engagement and diplomacy. Through a combination of bilateral agreements, multilateral frameworks, satellite data-sharing initiatives, and technical training programs, China has sought to position itself as a partner of choice for emerging and developing space actors. These partnerships are particularly prominent across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where China offers infrastructure, technology transfer, and capacity-building opportunities that may be less accessible through Western-led institutions (SCIO, 2022; Jakobson, 2015). Such efforts align with broader patterns in Chinese foreign policy, in which infrastructure and technological cooperation are used to deepen political and economic ties (Pollpeter et al., 2020).

China also participates in global discussions on space governance, including sustainability, debris mitigation, and the peaceful use of outer space (Pollpeter et al., 2020). However, its approach often emphasizes principles of national sovereignty and non-interference, which can diverge from Western-led regulatory frameworks (SCIO, 2022). As a result, China's space diplomacy operates as both a cooperative and a competitive endeavor: it promotes collaboration and development while advancing Beijing's strategic objective of reshaping global norms and institutions to reflect its interests. In this context, China's pursuit of leadership in launch capacity—including efforts to rival or surpass the United States in both state and commercial rocket launches—further highlights the intersection of technological competition and diplomatic positioning in the contemporary space domain (Marshall, 2023).

Key Developments and Core Challenges

Since the 1990s, there has been a concerted effort in China's space program to expand private-sector development and shift towards a more mixed approach, previously essentially state-controlled. The goal of this focus was to catch up with the US program, which has long been ahead of China's, by injecting fresh innovation to complement the state. Chinese provincial governments have long been the main investors in the space economy, and continued to invest in these private companies, while still maintaining major oversight, even after the transition. This new symbiosis led to an explosion of China's private sector in the following decades, particularly after the 2014 'Document 60' opened the sector to private investment (Boyd et al., 2025).

Since this development, there are now over 500 private companies in the sector, with an annual growth rate of over 20%. It is "nearing a turning point, shifting from a phase of policy incubation towards one of industrial-scale expansion" (Chen, 2026). Alongside lowering barriers to entry for new startups in the sector, local and federal authorities also use incentives such as loan discounts, political prestige rewards, and venture capital funds, as in other blossoming tech sectors. The effects are clear: China's space program has become far more efficient, fueled largely by the desire to close the gap with the U.S. in strategic space competition. This relationship is best exemplified by the annual successful orbital launches from 2014 to 2024: China went from 19

to 66, while the US skyrocketed from 18 to 145. Notably, in 2025, the commercial sector accounted for 54% of total launches. An explanation for the gap is China's current lack of reusable rockets, a factor attracting significant investment in resources to address (Chen, 2026). Even so, China is still generally behind the US space sectors in terms of size and output, but is making clear and effective efforts to narrow the gap.

These developments are embedded within a broader trajectory of sustained investment in launch systems, satellite infrastructure, and deep-space exploration. China's operationalization of the Tiangong space station demonstrates not only technical maturity but also a long-term commitment to maintaining a continuous human presence in orbit (SCIO, 2022). China has also expanded its satellite services and increased launch frequency, reinforcing both civilian and strategic capabilities. Beyond domestic capacity-building, Beijing has prioritized international institutional engagement, most notably through initiatives such as the proposed International Lunar Research Station (ILRS), which seeks to establish a multinational lunar base in partnership with other countries (Reuters, 2025). These efforts are complemented by expanded global partnerships across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where China provides infrastructure, training, and technical assistance. In parallel, the United States has advanced its own multilateral initiatives, including the Artemis Program and the Artemis Accords, which aim to establish norms for lunar exploration and resource utilization (NASA, 2020). The coexistence of these initiatives points towards an increasingly multipolar and potentially fragmented system of space governance.

At the same time, U.S.–China space relations remain constrained by institutional and legal barriers, most notably the Wolf Amendment, enacted in 2011, which prohibits bilateral cooperation between NASA and Chinese government-affiliated entities (Weeden, 2025). While intended to mitigate security risks, the amendment has had broader implications for global space governance, limiting opportunities for coordination on shared challenges such as space traffic management and orbital debris mitigation. Scholars argue that this lack of cooperation may exacerbate the risks of orbital congestion and collisions, while also reinforcing geopolitical rivalry and reducing transparency between the two leading space powers. As a result, this amendment has been debated regarding whether current U.S. policy frameworks are adequately adapted to an increasingly complex and interdependent space environment.

These dynamics generate a series of critical policy challenges for the United States. The first is how to interpret the nature of China's space diplomacy: whether it should be understood as primarily cooperative, competitive, or coercive. Many Chinese initiatives are framed in terms of scientific collaboration and mutual development, yet they often involve dual-use technologies with both civilian and military applications, complicating assessments of intent and risk. This ambiguity is further intensified by China's military-civil fusion strategy, which blurs the boundaries between commercial, scientific, and defense-related activities, thereby undermining transparency and trust (Pollpeter et al., 2020). Policymakers must also consider whether China seeks to reform existing international space institutions from within or to construct parallel governance structures that reflect its own strategic preferences. Emerging Chinese-led initiatives in lunar exploration and deep-space infrastructure raise additional legal questions, particularly regarding the establishment of precedents for resource extraction and long-term extraterrestrial presence. At the same time, space cooperation agreements may generate new forms of political leverage, particularly for countries that become reliant on Chinese technology and infrastructure. These considerations have prompted renewed debate over whether the Wolf Amendment remains appropriate or whether limited forms of engagement could better serve U.S. strategic interests.

China's expanding capabilities are likely to have far-reaching implications for the future of global space governance, including the setting of technical standards, the structure of international cooperation, and leadership within multilateral institutions. Partnerships with countries lacking independent space capacity may foster long-term technical dependence and align these states more closely with Chinese-led systems, both governmental and commercial (Reuters, 2025). The quick pace of Chinese innovation raises the possibility that it could challenge U.S. leadership in certain areas of space technology. The dual-use nature of many space technologies further

intensifies strategic competition, as advancements in satellite systems, launch capabilities, and data infrastructure carry both civilian and military implications (CFR, 2008). Nevertheless, shared global challenges, including orbital congestion,
space debris, and the need for effective space traffic management, underscore the continued necessity of some level of international cooperation. Together, these trends highlight the increasingly complex interplay between competition and collaboration in space, raising fundamental questions about how China's rise will shape the future of the global space order.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy steps are recommended for the U.S. government to take in response to China's growing space ambitions:

Soft Power Recommendations

China has been particularly effective at framing its space partnerships as South-South cooperation, appealing to nations historically excluded from Western-led initiatives (Pollpeter et al., 2020). To counter this, the United States should use its diplomatic networks to keep the broader public, governments, civil society, and private stakeholders informed and engaged about the shared values and cooperative frameworks that guide U.S. and allied space diplomacy. This includes leveraging astronauts as soft-power ambassadors — conveying crew members' messages through new communication tools and public platforms to humanize U.S. space leadership and build genuine international enthusiasm for U.S.-led missions. Embassies and diplomatic posts should also organize public watch parties for Artemis missions, transforming these events into shared cultural moments that project U.S. space achievement to global audiences in an accessible and engaging way. This is essential for maintaining the legitimacy and appeal of the U.S.-led space order in the eyes of emerging space nations.

The United States should also organize a series of multi-day workshops in strategic regions, in partnership with leading academic institutions and private space companies such as SpaceX and Blue Origin. These workshops would provide a forum to discuss space governance and international law, national security risks, economic opportunities, and technology transfer measures. Critically, they should also address the growing need to train a new generation of space diplomats; professionals with backgrounds spanning both technical space expertise and international relations who can represent U.S. interests in an increasingly complex and crowded space environment. These steps will help strengthen multilateral coalitions and the United States' norm-setting efforts within institutions such as UN COPUOS and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to shape space governance. This includes promoting shared norms around transparency, sustainability, and open access, while expanding international cooperation through joint missions and technology-sharing agreements.

This can be done by increasing engagement in existing international space capacity-building initiatives, such as NASA training programs, the Artemis Accords cooperation framework, and
United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) technical workshops, to provide emerging space nations with practical alternatives to Chinese space partnerships. A key priority in this effort should be strengthening State Department-NASA collaboration, ensuring that diplomatic and scientific efforts are formally coordinated rather than operating in parallel. Notably, the Artemis II mission has already generated a significant demand signal; many countries have established specialized space diplomacy posts as a direct result of U.S. lunar exploration activities, demonstrating the real diplomatic leverage that ambitious space missions can create. The United States should build on this momentum by strategically prioritizing its space relationships, focusing especially on emerging space nations in the Global South where Chinese partnerships are most actively competing for influence. In addition, the United States should lead international efforts to establish clear scientific and operational standards for lunar resource extraction, construction technologies, and data sharing before China's ILRS framework becomes more influential. Within the next five years, the United States should work with its over 60 Artemis Accords partner countries to develop guidelines for responsible resource utilization, safety protocols, and interoperability of lunar technologies. Establishing widely accepted standards early will help ensure that future lunar exploration operates within transparent, cooperative frameworks rather than under rules defined primarily by China's scientific institutions.

Hard Power Recommendations

China's military-civil fusion strategy blurs the boundaries among commercial, scientific, and defense-related space activities, creating significant risks of technology transfer. In response, the United States should consider targeted measures to limit cooperation with Chinese companies and research institutions involved in the transfer of sensitive space technologies. It should expand federal investment in commercial space innovation to sustain technological superiority while deploying targeted export controls to restrict sensitive space technology transfers to China. This includes collaborating with global allies to reduce partner-country dependence on Chinese space manufacturing.

The United States government should also ensure the scheduled completion of Artemis IV and its subsequent missions. Given that the Artemis program is a multinational effort involving over 60 partner countries, continued U.S. commitment to these missions is essential not only for maintaining technological leadership but also for demonstrating reliability and sustained engagement to its coalition of allies — a direct counter to China's efforts to position itself as the partner of choice for emerging space nations.

Additionally, the United States should establish a joint interagency committee to analyze and counter space-related disinformation. As China continues to frame its space activities through narratives of peaceful cooperation and shared development, it is essential that the United States and its allies are equipped to identify, assess, and respond to messaging that may obscure the strategic dimensions of China's space program. This committee should work closely with allies to share analyses and coordinate responses.

Smart Power Recommendations

China's most effective strategy lies in its ability to combine material investment with normative appeal using satellite partnerships to build both technological dependencies and diplomatic coalitions simultaneously. The United States must respond with an equally integrated approach that combines hard and soft power instruments in ways that reinforce one another.

The United States and its Artemis Accords partners should move swiftly to establish clear regulations for the use of lunar resources, ensuring that the norms governing extraction, sharing, and utilization reflect the interests of a broad international coalition rather than being shaped unilaterally by China's ILRS framework. This is not about first-mover advantage in a narrow sense but about ensuring that the rules of the road are set collaboratively and transparently before they are established by default.

The United States should also significantly expand cooperative lunar science programs with allies and Global South countries by providing access to satellite data, training programs, and joint space and lunar exploration experiments. Over the next five years, NASA and partner agencies should prioritize collaborative research initiatives and capacity-building programs that allow international scientists to participate in missions and access open scientific data. By making U.S.-led scientific cooperation more inclusive and transparent, the U.S. can directly counter China's soft-power appeal while simultaneously deepening the material and institutional ties that constitute hard-power leverage.

Finally, the United States should close the satellite partnership gap with countries worldwide through NASA. As this report has demonstrated, every satellite agreement China signs is simultaneously a hard power investment, a soft-power signal, and a vote in international governance forums. The United States must recognize satellite partnerships not merely as commercial or humanitarian arrangements but as a core instrument of its integrated space strategy.

Conclusion

The current strategic competition in space is ultimately a contest over infrastructure and norm-setting rather than a simple technological rivalry with a clear finish line. What is decided in the coming years, which frameworks govern lunar emerging nations adopt, and which institutions set the standards for responsible behavior in orbit, will shape the future of space for every nation that follows. Without a robust governance framework anchored by U.S. leadership, space risks becoming not a shared global commons but a domain defined by competing and incompatible systems of rules.

This report has analyzed China's approach to space through the lens of hard, soft, and smart power, demonstrating that China's strategy is not simply about technological achievement but about

building the infrastructure, partnerships, and institutional coalitions that will determine who governs space in the long term. China has made significant progress in narrowing the gap with the United States, but it has not surpassed it, and the United States retains considerable advantages in alliances, commercial innovation, and multilateral legitimacy that, if deployed strategically, position it well to lead.

For the United States to maintain that leadership, diplomatic relations with emerging space nations must be established and deepened now, before dependencies on Chinese systems become entrenched. The Artemis Accords coalition of over 60 nations represents a strong foundation, but it must be actively sustained and expanded through an integrated hard-, soft-, and smart-power strategy outlined in this report. The state that shapes the governance of space will shape the final frontier for every nation that follows, and the window to do so remains open, but it will not remain open indefinitely.

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