

LATIN AMERICA AND THE SPACE RACE

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On June 14, Brazil signed up to NASA's Artemis Project, which plans to put astronauts back on the Moon in 2024 and on Mars during the following decade. In Brasilia, President Jair Bolsonaro described the event as a "great agreement" to join a project of "peace, progress and development" and where "trust is reciprocal" between the twelve countries that comprise it. In reality, it is an American project to which, for strategic and political reasons, other countries have been joining. The other four countries of Anglo origin that are part of it: United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. From Western Europe, the countries included are Luxembourg and Italy (which was the first of the thirteen European Union countries that signed the Chinese Silk Road project to abandon it at Biden's request); from the Gulf monarchies, the Artemis project includes the United Arab Emirates (which carried out its first mission to Mars in February); from Asia, South Korea and Japan (strong military allies of the United States, invited to participate in the G7 meeting carried out in Cornwall) and Vietnam, a country that has acquired good relations with the United States due to its maritime boundary conflicts with China.

It is clear that the countries chosen by the United States to be partners in this strategic project have a regional significance. That is why the inclusion of Brazil implies the inclusion of Latin America through its most important country, since it accounts for half of the GDP, territory and population of the twelve countries of South America, or a third of the entire region (including Mexico and Central America and the Caribbean). It should be noted that in March, Brazil launched its first satellite, Amazonia 1, from an aerospace base in southern India and developed the project with technology from this country and China. According to the Brazilian government, this is a long-term strategic decision, but it also indicates that the relationship with the Biden Administration is not as bad as the environmental issue reveals. In a clear signal that the bilateral relationship with Washington continues to be a priority for Brazil, Bolsonaro, in a speech before the US ambassador in Brasilia, Dod Chapman, said "you can count on us, just as we count on you." He added that Brazil "is aligned with the world," as shown by the agreement with NASA and the support of the Biden Administration for Brazil to be a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

One of Bolsonaro's first measures upon taking office was to renew the use and control of the Alcântara space launch base, located in the state of Maranhao, for the United States, in exchange for a budget allocation for maintenance destined to the Armed Forces. Bolsonaro supported Trump's theory that there had been fraud in the US presidential elections, which distanced him from the Democratic president. For the Brazilian president, the former Republican president was an ideological point of reference and a role model too. Biden's criticisms of Brazil for climate change and the deforestation of the Amazon Rainforest were initially rejected by Bolsonaro. Despite this, in May of this year he participated in a Summit on climate change called by Biden, where fifty presidents of the world were invited to participate. There, the Brazilian president promised to accelerate the fulfillment of the Brazilian goals to stop the logging of the Amazon Rainforest, 60% of which is in Brazilian territory. At the same time, on June 15 in Saint Petersburg, during the Global Space Exploration event (GLEXP), Russia and China presented their lunar station project. The International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) plans to be ready by 2035. Officials from both governments, who made the plans explicit, pointed that the ILRS is expected to be developed at the same time but separately from the US Artemis space exploration program.

Wu Yanhua, deputy director of the China National Space Administration (CNSA), presented the scientific objectives, the facilities and transportation, the lunar surface infrastructure, the development phases and cooperation frameworks for the company. The first of these phases, designated as "reconnaissance", involves data collection and verification of high-precision soft landings in 2021-2025, with the Chinese missions Chang'e 4, 6 and 7, Luna 25, 26 and 27 from Russia and possible partner missions. The second "building" phase consists of two stages (2026-30 and 2031-35). The first involves technology checks, sample returns, mass cargo delivery, and the initiation of joint operations. The planned missions are Chang'e-8 and Luna 28 that foresee potential international contributions. The final "utilization" phase after 2036 would see the start of manned landings. The CNSA posted English and Chinese versions of the roadmap on its web pages, while Roscosmos (Russia's state space company) shared an introductory video on Twitter.

The ILRS of Russia and China is open to cooperation and association with international organizations and countries, as is the case with the Artemis Project in the United States. Russia and China signed a memorandum of understanding on the ILRS in March. International partners were openly invited on the sidelines of the Scientific and Technical Subcommittee of the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) on April 23. China and Russia presented five areas of cooperation in which potential partners could collaborate. Wu said the parties hoped to produce a legal document detailing the principles of the ILRS before the end of the year. Those responsible for the project stated that talks had been held with the European Space Agency and the French CNES, while Thailand, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had expressed interest in the project. However, Wu noted that the discussions are at a very early stage. The development came after Brazil became the twelfth nation to join the Artemis Accords. Marco Aliberti, a resident fellow at the European Space Policy Institute in Austria, told SpaceNews that the development of ILRS "signals the progressive bifurcation of the international space community around two conflicting pathways for future lunar exploration activities." In fact, as far as partnerships are concerned, Artemis and the ILRS tend to form alternative projects for their eventual partners.

In conclusion: the incorporation of Brazil to NASA's Artemis Project shows that the Washington-Brasilia relationship is beyond circumstantial governments. Reasonably, Bolsonaro sought to present the event as a sign that the change of Administration in the US did not alter this substantial relationship. At the same time, in Saint Petersburg, China and Russia presented their joint project for an international lunar research station (ILRS), which they plan to have ready by 2035. Finally, this project also foresees, like the American one, the partnership with international organizations and countries, and this will reach Latin America as well.