

# Artemis II mission concludes after astronauts travel to the Moon and safely return to Earth

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NASA's Orion spacecraft carrying four astronauts splashed down in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of San Diego on Friday at 8:07 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time, completing the Artemis II mission, the first crewed flight to the vicinity of the Moon since the Apollo 17 mission in December 1972. Recovery teams from NASA and the US Navy retrieved the crew from the capsule and transported them by helicopter to the US Navy vessel John P. Murtha, where they underwent post-mission medical evaluations.

The crew, NASA astronauts Reid Wiseman (commander), Victor Glover (pilot), Christina Koch (mission specialist), and Jeremy Hansen of the Canadian Space Agency (mission specialist), launched from Kennedy Space Center in Florida on April 1 aboard the Space Launch System rocket. Over the course of just over nine days, the Orion spacecraft, named Integrity, completed a lunar flyby, approaching within approximately 4,067 miles (6,545 kilometers) of the Moon's surface on April 6 before returning to Earth, on a trajectory spanning nearly 695,000 miles (more than 1.1 million km).

The final parts of the mission included a third trajectory correction burn, the separation of the crew module from the European service module, and a last 18-second adjustment burn to set the capsule's entry angle at the most optimal position for atmospheric entry. What followed was a six-minute communications blackout as Integrity plowed through Earth's atmosphere starting at a speed of approximately 23,864 miles per hour (38,405 km per hour), causing a sheath of flaming plasma around the spacecraft that blocked all telemetry to mission control.

The four astronauts experienced forces of 3.9 times Earth's gravity and temperatures on the heat shield reached approximately 3,000 degrees Fahrenheit (1,649 degrees Celsius). They then coasted briefly before deploying the spaceship's parachutes and touched down in the Pacific Ocean at a relatively gentle 19 miles per

hour.

By the parameters set for it, the mission has been a success. Initial medical reports indicate the astronauts are healthy and will soon be back on land. The various scientific experiments conducted, largely focused on the impacts of radiation on humans beyond low Earth orbit, were completed and will be more carefully studied in the coming months to inform future missions. An international team of thousands of engineers, scientists and other workers across NASA and its contractors, from designing, building and testing the spacecraft to operating it and communicating with it during the past 10 days all contributed to this massive effort.

Yet the Artemis II mission has been conducted largely in the background of US capitalism in terminal crisis. The Trump administration's war against Iran, now in its fifth week, has killed thousands, destroyed historical sites, driven up fuel and commodity prices, and brought the world to the edge of a broader conflict. On April 8, with Orion on its return trajectory, Vice President JD Vance threatened that the US possessed tools in its "tool kit" it had "so far" not chosen to use, strongly implying the possible use of nuclear weapons. The following day, Trump issued the genocidal threat that "a whole civilization will die tonight." The current two-week "ceasefire" was almost immediately broken by Israel, which launched a murderous bombardment on Lebanon that has so far cost 303 lives.

Even the bourgeois press has been forced to note this context. Philip Kennicott, writing in the *Washington Post* during the mission, observed that Artemis II was proceeding "without any of that larger framing, or soaring rhetoric" that characterized the Apollo era, as the world watched the US president use "the language of genocide and apocalypse to threaten a country that posed no imminent danger to the United States." He concluded that Artemis II felt like "an echo of a world that has passed"

as Trump promises “to return an entire people to the Stone Age.”

From the outset, the mission has been framed in terms of geopolitical competition, above all with China. NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman, the billionaire entrepreneur appointed by Trump, was present in person at the naval retrieval of the astronauts. He said afterwards that the US is “back in the business of sending astronauts to the Moon.” And despite the explicit exclusion of China and Russia in future US missions, Isaacman cynically claimed the mission was designed to send “ambassadors from humanity to the stars.”

As for Trump himself, he claimed in an earlier conversation with the astronauts that, in part because of Artemis II, “America is the hottest country in the world right now.” He continued that, “America will be second to none in space.”

The nationalist framing is bound up with the broader context of US space policy. Throughout the presidencies of Bush, Obama, Trump’s first term and Biden, US national security documents have placed dominance in space as a strategic necessity to counter the emerging power of China.

In Trump’s first term, this involved establishing the US Space Force in 2019, declaring outer space a “potential theater of conflict” in modern warfare. This has evolved now to Trump’s National Space Policy, the centerpiece of which is the plan to establish a permanent base on the surface of the Moon.

The Moon base plan is slated to proceed in three phases. The first uses the Commercial Lunar Payload Services (CLPS) initiative and a Lunar Terrain Vehicle (LTV) program to build surface infrastructure. The second introduces what NASA terms “semi-habitable” facilities and incorporates international contributions, including a pressurized rover from the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA). The third envisions continuous human presence, supported by cargo-capable landing systems delivering up to 38 tons of payload per year.

To accomplish this, NASA has formally abandoned the Gateway, the lunar-orbiting space station that was previously the centerpiece of the Artemis architecture, citing delays, cost overruns, corrosion problems in key modules, and the fact that the human landing system contractors, billionaire fascist Elon Musk’s SpaceX and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos’s Blue Origin, do not require it to reach the lunar surface. Gateway hardware will be repurposed where possible; the rest will be set aside.

The focus, which was laid out in NASA’s recent

“Ignition” event, is countering China’s lunar program, which includes the numerous Chang’e probes, the Queqiao communications satellites and plans for a research base at the Moon’s southern pole. Water ice existing in parts of craters under permanent shadow is the resource most sought after by competing national interests. Access to that ice would enable in situ production of rocket propellant, as well as water for consumption, hygiene and sanitation, and both the US and China are determined to secure a foothold before the other.

Moreover, the entire National Space Policy is not about scientific research, but to channel billions of dollars into “commercial partners”—primarily SpaceX, but also Blue Origin and others—which are placed at the center of every phase of building the lunar base. NASA will not be playing a leading role in developing the new technologies needed to build the base, which do not yet exist, but merely a “customer” in the market the agency is attempting to generate.

In other words, the ultimate goal is extending capitalism and US imperialism to the Moon, and in doing so militarize the entire 240,000-mile-long corridor, which will be justified by the need to protect ships traveling to establish a lunar base. Such plans explicitly involve placing nuclear reactors in space, which are against the principles of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, and inevitably, nuclear weapons.

The logic of the modern space race makes clear that the fight for a progressive expansion by humanity into space is bound up with the fight against war and against capitalism as a whole. There can be no genuine scientific exploration of the Moon and beyond while space travel is subordinated to corporate profiteering and military conflicts. Such efforts will only flourish when the international working class has swept away the current outmoded social order and established society on socialist foundations.



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