# China’s steady space ambitions clash with Elon Musk’s turbulent Starship setbacks



In recent years, a pronounced divergence has emerged between aspirations for space exploration in China and the West, particularly the United States. A 2019 poll conducted by Lego revealed that a remarkable 56 per cent of Chinese children aged eight to twelve dreamt of becoming astronauts. This fervour starkly contrasted with their Western counterparts; in Britain and the U.S., the ambition to explore space was more incidental, with only about 10 per cent envisioning a similar future. Instead, many opted for contemporary titles like "YouTuber," reflecting changing societal values that may inadvertently signal a decline in aspirations for interstellar exploration.

The modern iteration of the Space Race has shifted focus from the Cold War competition between the USA and USSR to a renewed challenge seemingly led by China. With grand ambitions of becoming the pre-eminent space power, China aims to surpass American advancements in lunar and Martian missions, highlighting its ascendancy as a global hegemon. Following a recent failed test flight of SpaceX's Starship that culminated in a dramatic explosion over the Indian Ocean, discussions regarding competitiveness in space are heating up. The incident marked yet another setback for Elon Musk’s SpaceX, an entity often revered for its pioneering achievements but increasingly embroiled in a cycle of costly failures.

Musk's strategies, characterised by significant financial investment and frequent launches, embody a high-risk approach. The terminology "rapid unscheduled disassembly," coined after an earlier explosion, has become a kind of dark humour within the aerospace community, underscoring the frailty of even the most ambitious plans. Despite these setbacks, Musk's goals remain audacious, vying to occupy Mars within mere years—a timeline that would be ambitious for decades rather than a matter of months.

Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping's government has been methodically positioning itself to make a monumental leap in space exploration. China’s well-structured plans include aims to land astronauts on the Moon by 2030, strategising for an all-female crew aboard a Long March rocket in a bid to herald the country’s space success. The contrast between Musk's impulsive pace and China's calculated advances reflects broader geopolitical dynamics. China is ramping up its space ambitions, planning approximately 100 launches within this year alone, including critical lunar missions aimed at sample collection.

American efforts, once marred by bureaucratic entanglements and political strife, have seen a resurgence under recent administrations, leading to bold proclamations of lunar return by 2028. However, doubts linger regarding the feasibility of this timeframe given the fragmentation in U.S. resources and the competing interests of entities like Blue Origin, founded by Jeff Bezos. While Bezos promotes a more measured approach focusing on specific technological milestones, Musk's vision remains fixated on rapid outcomes—a challenging environment for collaboration.

Moreover, as evidenced by Japan's successful lunar landing, a competitive landscape is forming around lunar exploration, further heightened by China's escalating ambitions. As various nations strive to etch their names on the Moon, the psychological and cultural implications of who 'gets there first' intensify. For Xi, establishing a permanent presence on the Moon would not only signify technological prowess but would represent a crucial foothold in global influence.

The complexities entwined in developing technology to sustain human life on distant planets cannot be overstated. From launching missions with crewed spacecraft to creating the infrastructures necessary for survival, the challenges of interplanetary colonisation form an intimidating checklist. As President George H. W. Bush famously suggested, investments in space technologies yield substantial economic dividends. The financial engagement in space exploration encompasses not merely funding; it encompasses engendering innovation that ripples through various sectors.

Thus, as nations strive towards an epoch marked by renewed ambitions for space, it begs a critical inquiry: who shall successfully navigate this modern Space Race? Will it be a nation that inspires its youth to aspire towards the stars, or one where ambitions are channelled toward social media eminence? The journey ahead promises monumental breakthroughs and unsettling risks—but also the essence of a groundbreaking renaissance in human aspiration to conquer the cosmos.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14758847/China-man-moon-Elon-Musk-billionaires-space-race.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
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2. <https://www.ft.com/content/b635423f-e721-454c-b75c-98d0ad8fedf1> - An article from the Financial Times discusses the dominance of SpaceX's Starlink in the low Earth orbit satellite broadband market, highlighting its over 7,300 active satellites and 5 million users across 125 countries. The piece also touches upon China's advancements in satellite technology, including the development of its own satellite constellations, and the geopolitical implications of these developments in the global space race.
3. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/science/article/2024/06/24/xichang-space-center-showcases-china-s-cosmic-ambitions_6675564_10.html> - Le Monde reports on China's ambitious space program, focusing on the successful launch of the Long March 2-C rocket from the Xichang Space Center. The article details China's plans for approximately 100 launches in 2024, the Chang'e-6 mission to collect lunar samples, and the goal to send astronauts to the moon by 2030, positioning China as a formidable space power.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/b10cd4217199ff513dc744bf785d6b89> - The Associated Press covers Japan's successful lunar landing, joining an exclusive group of nations with this achievement. The article contrasts this with China's plans to send astronauts to the moon by the end of the decade and highlights the global competition in lunar exploration, including the United States' plans for future missions.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/spacexs-next-starship-test-flight-surviving-hypersonic-return-is-key-2024-06-06/> - Reuters reports on SpaceX's Starship achieving a significant milestone by surviving a fiery, hypersonic return from space and successfully landing in the Indian Ocean on its fourth test attempt. The article discusses the importance of this development for future missions, including launching satellites and landing astronauts on the moon for NASA by 2026.
6. <https://apnews.com/article/0e538a1519b8fa7056078e2b968b52fa> - The Associated Press details China's launch of its youngest-ever crew to its orbiting space station aboard the Shenzhou 17 spacecraft. The article highlights China's ambitious plan to land astronauts on the moon by 2030 and its ongoing advancements in space technology, including the development of its own space station.
7. <https://time.com/6962362/china-space-program-moon/> - Time magazine explores China's rapid progress in its space program, noting its plans to return to the moon before the U.S. The article discusses China's consistent and well-funded space strategy, including 70 launches in 2024 and significant missions aimed at lunar exploration, positioning China as a strong competitor in the space race.