U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Opening Statement at Committee Hearing
"There's a Bad Moon on the Rise: Why Congress and NASA Must Thwart China in the Space Race"
September 3, 2025
[VIDEO]

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I'm glad to join you today in this fight to say we must maintain our focus on returning to the moon. It's good to see the witnesses here, Mr. Cutler, Mr. Gold, Mr. Bridenstine and Lieutenant General Shaw. But also want to recognize Bill Nye, also a Northwest Planetary Society individual who is here today as well. I look forward to all of your testimony.

Today we're here in a race with China to return to the moon and stay there. Beating China back to the moon isn't just about bragging rights, and it's certainly not just about grabbing headlines. But today, it's clear that President Xi, President Putin and Prime Minister Modi are all in China having a big national security and strategic discussion that could easily, easily include space and defense and security and defense implications.

No surprise actually, that Kim Jong Un is also there. Let's just take for a consideration that he would like to figure out how to improve his rocket technology with more accuracy, more distance, more tracking. I don't like the scenario. The strategic value of maintaining our position to live and work in space is critical. It's critical to our future economic and national security. Returning to the moon requires us to push the limits of technology to find the solutions that we can solve and maintain our national defense and innovation economy. All you have to do is look back to the 1960s and look at the development of technologies that created an ecosystem within the United States of America that led to discoveries and innovations that we're still now counting on today.

So, we must not waver in this important mission of technology and national security defense. I believe each of the witnesses will tell us something about this today and why the consequences of failing to achieve this goal will be monumental. We know we need to go back to the moon, and we know we need to go there before China establishes a permanent presence. I want to hear – importantly—about the expertise these individuals think that we must pull together so that we won't fall short of this goal. It's clear in some of your testimony, you're already articulating the strategic advantage China has of being so uniform on their government structure. We, on the other hand, are trying to work both within the government and within the commercial sector, on a partnership that allows all of us to creatively work together and move forward.

That is why, Lieutenant General Shaw, I found your statement in your testimony quite compelling; quote, "I believe if we do not unify and synchronize our efforts, we will find ourselves rather than the space leaders we are today, instead in a position of increasing disadvantage in space as we progress further into this century." End quote, I don't want to see that reality either. I want us to explore how to get the most out of NASA's commercial partnership and determine if sufficient redundancy in the provisions of commercial space are there to ensure that.

The state of Washington plays a very proud role in the exploration of space and the space economy -- about 77,000 people employed today, just in the space economy, obviously, more than 100,000 employed in aerospace in general. So these are important companies to us, Aerojet Rocketdyne, Boeing, Blue Origin, all working on rocket infrastructure, crew capsules, Gateway lunar landing orbit station and human landers. All of these are so important.

And also just a shout out to the returning Colonel Anne McClain from Spokane, who just returned from serving as the [Crew] Commander on the ISS mission from March through August of this year. So yes, we have a lot of people thinking about space in the Northwest.

So, I am concerned about the current plan and what we are doing to make sure that we continue to push forward. I would love to see the continued focus on dual landers, given how important they are going to be for the future. It's not just one time. It's many times. This is an operation where we're going to continue to return and be an operational system. So I want to make sure that we have the best. I want to make sure that NASA has backup plans that takes advantage and ensures that the already delayed mission does not slip any further.

I don't know that it takes a genius to figure out that while China may be projecting 2030, or some time period, there's nothing to say that they won't go sooner. There are people we talked to in trying to brief the press about this today, who are betting that they are going to go sooner and that they are going to beat us. So we don't need another Sputnik moment. It's already happened. The only thing we have to do is make sure we in Congress get the budget right and support the Artemis mission. I appreciate everything the Chair has done in putting money towards the Artemis mission, and I appreciate everything that we are doing collectively to assure that the administration spins it.

But I also want to point out that, as Lieutenant General Shaw also says, this whole cislunar communication architecture -- that is the space between the Earth and the Moon -- that is what China would love to do, go dominate the communication system between the [Earth] and the moon. That's what they're already working on. We can't allow that to happen. We need to continue to move forward quickly, fastly, with these investments, because our national security and defense depends on it.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to asking the witnesses more detailed questions about this, the President's budget, and why we need to make sure that we are funding this appropriate mission for the future, not just of our innovation, but also for our national security. Thank you.

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Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for illuminating this issue of why we need a grand strategy. I think it's a good terminology that equates to the notion that the time is here to think bigger about the implementation of all the things. It reminds me sitting here how a colleague once said to me, you know, your state should be called Jefferson. I said, my state should be called Jefferson? He said, yes, it was President Jefferson who basically made the big decision to send Lewis and Clark, at a critical moment in our country's history, to go all the way across the United States, strive to find if there was a faster path, and lay claim to the Pacific Northwest. Because other people were already there, obviously by ship, and President Jefferson saw the importance of America's expansion all the way to the Pacific coast. So anyway, we're still proud.

We're called Washington, but it brings up this point about the predicate of getting there first. And I don't know if this is you Mr. Gold or Lieutenant General Shaw, but there are areas, particularly the south pole of the moon, that are critically and strategically important. And getting there in a timely fashion to claim those resources or claim that space, seems to be just as critical as Jefferson's decision to get us all the way out to the Pacific. I don't know if one of you want to comment on that.

Gold: Senator, I would say even more critical than Jefferson's decision, because this doesn't affect the country, this affects the whole world. And you're exactly right. The moon is a large place, but the number of locations that have the combination of water-ice, sunlight and other aspects that we need are actually relatively limited, and we could lose those to the Chinese if we don't move quickly.

Additionally, the countries that get there first will write the rules of the road for what we can do on the moon, how we act. We've had tremendous success with the Artemis Accords -- 56 countries have signed. The Chinese only have 13 for their International Lunar Space Research Station Program. But if we're not first, trust me, those numbers will change. And the fear? China will eventually outspend us in space. It's inevitable. We must out-entrepreneur them and that's why I'm so grateful for one of your constituents, Blue Origin, for example. And for some reason, this doesn't get, I think, enough play -- they have spent billions, billions of their own

money to support the HLS system. They're going to launch a Mark 1 spacecraft to the moon, paid for all on their own dime…

Sen. Cantwell: I'm assuming everybody's for the redundancy of the lunar [landing] system, yes? (witnesses nod yes).

Gold: Yes!

Bridenstine: And we're grateful for your leadership to make that happen.

Gold: …which we desperately need because you have to have two. You need that for efficiency, you need that for competition, you need that for safety. But again, if we don't get out there and get there first, we'll lose real estate, we'll lose the rules of the road, and we'll lose the international partnerships and the economic benefits. And Helium-3 – that could be a new clean power revolution that we're going to let the Chinese Communist Party have. Let's step up.

Sen. Cantwell: We do have some companies already working on this in the northwest. I'm very proud of that. Lieutenant General Shaw, so this notion…I get up this morning and see all the headlines from China, and everybody's there together, including Prime Minister Modi and Kim Jong Un -- although we don't have all the photos of this – and you can see that somebody could really start focusing on new alliances. What is it about the grand strategy that is so critical for us to implement from a military perspective? How can you describe it in the context of losing this first mover advantage that would be so critical to the alliances and partnerships that would help us?

Lt. Gen. Shaw: Senator, I think, as some of the other panelists have said, this Earth-Moon system, these opportunities in the moon are not just for exploration alone – anymore than that the Lewis and Clark expeditions were just, "Oh, I wonder what's out there." No, they were about to understand the environment, to scope it for economic growth, and of course, there were security issues along the way. I point out that Clark was a lieutenant, US Army,…but there to provide security and understanding of what our borders and frontiers were. And so we need to approach the moon the same way – that it's all of these pieces, all of the DIME that honorable Bridenstine mentioned.

"So one of these examples that we've talked about…where we could do this better as a nation would be cislunar domain awareness. There are going to be needs for that, just for human

presence in and around the moon, to understand that domain. What debris might be in lunar orbit? It's a different kind of regime than low Earth orbit that we're used to. But there are the possibility that there will be things in orbit, we'll understand what's there. We'll want to understand what possible mischief could be going on. It's easy to hide things way, way out there. We'll want to understand that.

So not only protecting humans in human exploration, but there is a national security need to understand that environment as part of the full Earth-Moon system. And to my knowledge, right now, the government defense isn't really focusing that much on that. If there's a national need to do it, why not have the Department of Defense perhaps be part of that solution and develop the capabilities it's going to ultimately need anyway. So that's this idea of where we're we probably could do things in a much more coordinated and synergistic fashion than we're currently doing.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I'm definitely very concerned about our communication security writ large. And I do think more of defense is moving into space and satellite effects of communication. And then I worry that if somebody is going to be on that frontier of the latest of technology, communication in a cislunar environment, that has to be us, and we have to understand what the ramifications are of that system. Is that not correct?

Lt. Gen. Shaw: That is absolutely correct. And again, I'd like to point out that China sent seven payloads to the moon last year, six of them were communications focused. They weren't scientific experiments. They were communications focused, the building blocks of a communications architecture. So they're already demonstrating the fact they are trying to build that infrastructure that I talked about before.

Sen. Cantwell: And do you have any idea of what that infrastructure could do that would be a military concern?

Lt. Gen. Shaw: The term dual use has already been brought up by by the panel. Any capability that could be used for scientific or exploration or even economic purposes invariably is going to have some sort of national security use to it, of some kind. As an example in this particular case, if there are Chinese national security payloads operating in the broader Earth-Moon system, they could leverage that communication architecture network to have continuous communications with those platforms rather than relying on strictly terrestrial relays.

Sen. Cantwell: Oh, well, big advantage there. Thank you. Mr. Chairman.