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THE UNITED STATES AND SPACE EXPLORATION: DIRECTION OR DRIFT?

**Abstract**

The White House and the Congress are supporting, and NASA has embarked on, the first elements of a "capabilities based" approach to human space exploration - the Space Launch System, the Orion spacecraft, and the ground operations associated with these two systems. An initial uncrewed mission to circumnavigate the Moon is planned for 2017, followed four years later by a crew-carrying mission on a similar trajectory.

The paper will ask whether these steps are an adequate starting point for a sustainable human exploration effort that will put the United States in a leadership position in a global exploration effort, or whether they are too fragile to survive the inevitable political questioning regarding the wisdom of expending multiple billions of dollars without a clear statement of destinations, schedules, and rationales, and without (to date) a top-level U.S. invitation to other countries to work together in pursuing such a global effort.