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CHINA'S PLAN FOR AN INTERNATIONAL LUNAR RESEARCH STATION : A PATH TOWARDS
MULTILATERALISM OR THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

Abstract

After the successful completion of its lunar exploration program, which culminated in the automatic collection of lunar samples, in 2021 China announced its intention to build by the mid-2030's, jointly with Russia, an International Lunar Research Station at the Moon's south pole. Besides its fascination, China's announcement is particularly significant both from a political and legal perspective. On one side, the Chinese plan for a Lunar Station is being developed parallelly to a US-led initiative, the Artemis Program, that, similarly, aims at building a permanent station on the lunar surface. On the other side, unlike the Artemis Program, that has been provided with a basic, yet somewhat comprehensive, legal framework, the Artemis Accords, China's Lunar Station initiative has not given any sort of political/legal structure so far. Considering these developments, one must wonder how these two initiatives could be developed and co-exists together, particularly what kind of regulatory framework could be developed to prevent conflicts and enables the respect of each other's rights to explore and use the Moon. These questions become even more relevant when one considers the current international discussions within the United Nations on the legal aspects of space resources utilization activities as well as the absence of an official and distinctive legal position of China relating to undertakings on the Moon and the utilization of the resources contained therein. The purpose of the present paper is, thus, to ascertain China's legal approach towards lunar activities, both of scientific and non-scientific nature, by assessing its: a) statements within international fora; b) domestic regulations and policies; c) bilateral and regional arrangements. Ultimately, the goal of the analysis is to envision whether China is more likely to play a positive role towards shaping a multilateral approach governing lunar activities or if, instead, its actions are keener to contribute to the formation of two parallel, and potentially competing, lunar legal regimes.