NASA is leading the way to the Moon, but the military won’t be far behind



But observing objects in cislunar space from the Earth is not easy. First, the Moon is a quarter-million miles away, so spacecraft or debris will appear vanishingly faint to sensors near the Earth. The Moon and the Sun far outshine these objects. Second, using a satellite stationed near the Moon to obtain a fix and vector for an object requires precise navigation, a capability not readily available without reliable GPS signals.

If anyone knows exactly where a satellite is around the Moon today, it is due to the generosity of its operator. If they choose to, spacecraft owners can provide detailed ephemeris data, revealing their location and movement, but there’s no way to force any operator to publish this information. Some operators may not want to share their location for competitive or strategic advantage.

There is also the risk of a satellite breakup in lunar orbit that could create a field of space debris. There is currently no way to track such small fragments at lunar distances, raising the risk of damaging or destructive collisions. If a lunar satellite disintegrated, it could “compromise international science missions and destabilize emerging lunar economic activity,” according to a 2025 report from the Mitre Corporation, a not-for-profit organization that manages several federally funded research centers.

Some generals bring the subject of lunar military operations back to Earth. In 2024, Ars asked Space Force Maj. Gen. Anthony Mastalir, then a one-star general, about the military’s view of the Moon. He identified a potential adversary’s use of the Moon or orbits around them as a launch point for an attack directed at US assets closer to the Earth.

“We’re not fighting over mineral deposits on an asteroid somewhere. We’re not, right now, shepherding convoys to Mars,” Mastalir said. “These are terrestrial conflicts that we hope we can deter. We also don’t want them to, although it’s more and more likely that they may, extend into space or even start in space.

“Someday in the future, that may change, but for now, I’d be more concerned just about what these new orbits present, what that does for potential attack vectors to our traditional operating [areas].”

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