

Trump vows to plant flag on Mars, omits mention of Moon return

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This handout image taken by NASA's Curiosity Mars rover and released on February 8, 2023, shows a close-up of the rippled textures that was created billions of years ago as waves flowed upon a shallow lake.

US President Donald Trump vowed Monday to "plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars" but made no mention of NASA's planned return to the moon, heightening speculation about his space strategy.

During his first term, the Republican launched the Artemis program to return astronauts to the moon as a stepping stone to the Red Planet -- yet even then he expressed doubts about the moon's necessity.

"We will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars," he said in his inauguration speech at the US Capitol in Washington, remarks unlikely to quell the idea he wants to skip the moon.

Trump is thought to be joined in his desire by his close ally and Elon Musk, the CEO of SpaceX, who envisages colonizing Mars with the help of his prototype rocket Starship.

Musk retweeted a clip of himself raising two thumbs up, grinning, and clapping wildly as Trump made his remarks.

"We're going straight to Mars. The moon is a distraction," Musk wrote on X earlier this month.

Such a shift would be seismic for a program projected to cost over \$90 billion.

It is also likely to meet stiff opposition in the US Congress, where both Republicans and Democrats have an interest in preserving jobs in their constituencies linked to exploring the moon.

Much of this revolves around the Space Launch System (SLS), NASA's heavy-lift rocket with contractors and suppliers spread across the country.

China, meanwhile, has set its sights on landing on the [lunar south pole](#) by 2030, a move the United States is unlikely to let go unchallenged.

On the other hand, the next NASA chief is slated to be Jared Isaacman, a billionaire private astronaut who has had business dealings with SpaceX, raising questions of possible conflicts-of-interest.

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