



Written by [James Heiser](#) on April 15, 2011

Russia's President Announces Plan for Moon Base

This week marks the 50th anniversary of one of the most significant milestones in the "Space Race" between the United States and the Soviet Union, and it comes at a time when Russia once again hopes to sprint head of any rival space program.

On April 12, 1961, Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin became the first human being to enter space and orbit the Earth. (Alan Shepard's suborbital flight a few weeks later marked the first flight of an American in space.) The 50th anniversary of Gagarin's flight is a reminder that at several occasions during the early years of the "Space Race," the Soviets were in the lead; for example, in addition to the milestone of launching the first man into space, the U.S.S.R. also launched the first satellite — *Sputnik 1* — on October 4, 1957 and the first space station in April, 1971, and one of its astronauts conducted the first space walk on March 18, 1965.



After the arrival of *Apollo 11* on the moon's surface on July 20, 1969, many of the earlier Soviet successes were forgotten. Gagarin had died the previous year, when his MiG 15 training jet crashed. In the general consensus, America had "won" the space race.

Now, as Russia marks the 50th anniversary of Gagarin's historic flight, there may be grounds for reevaluating that assessment. President Obama has [fundamentally altered the role of NASA](#) in the future of manned space flight, even as private companies are independently developing launch vehicles that could serve a wide variety of private or public missions. (In fact, [SpaceX recently announced](#) it plans to build the large booster since the Apollo program's Saturn V.)

Russia is continuing to develop its manned space program, and has now announced that it is planning to build a moon base by 2030. [As Terrence Aym wrote for Helium.com:](#)

While the US has reduced its national space program to skeletal proportions—and is now picking at the bones—Russia has announced an aggressive plan to build a huge base on the Moon. During festivities celebrating the 50th anniversary of the first human ever to reach space, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin vowed Russia would have a moonbase. The promise came on the heels of a Kremlin press release that stated, in part, "Above all, we are talking about flights to the moon and the creation of a base close to its north pole where there is likely to be a source of water," it explained. "This could be achieved close to 2030."

The presence of water on the moon was confirmed by NASA's Lunar Crater Observation and Sensing Satellite (or LCROSS) which was deliberately [crashed into the lunar south pole](#) in 2009 as part of the



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search for water and the presence of water at the moon's north pole was proven by India's [Chandrayaan-1](#) spacecraft just last year.

As Aym observes, Russia's space program is "military, not civilian, based. That worries U.S. military intelligence." However, before too much worry develops over Putin's plan for a moon base, it is worth noting that Russia has yet to have a single Cosmonaut step foot on the lunar surface; Putin's pronouncement sounds more like the noises than national leaders always make on the anniversary of some past achievement. The failure of an whole series of American presidents to form a coherent approach to space has simply served to highlight the value of private efforts to lead the way. The contest between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. led to many scientific breakthroughs in the capacity for space travel, but it is more likely that the future of space exploration and development rests with private industry.

Illustration: A NASA artist's conception of a lunar base.



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