

Japan experts call for robot expedition to moon

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"It is extremely important to probe the [moon](#)... as we now see the dawn of the age of great exploration in the solar system," the report formally adopted by the panel on Thursday said.

"China, India and other countries are aiming to probe the moon. If Japan's activity is delayed, it will become difficult to maintain our

superiority in science regarding the moon," it said.

Noting a Japanese [observation satellite](#) had succeeded in sending high-definition images of the entire moon, the report argued the nation needed to enhance its probe also for the sake of its "international presence."

The panel, made up of experts from the state-funded Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency as well as business and academia, approved the report as it wrapped up a one-year debate on what form the nation's moon probe should take.

Under the plan, the robot's tasks would include setting up an observation device and gathering geological samples for sending back to Earth. The [robot](#) would also set up solar panels to generate energy.

The team also envisions building the world's first station on the south pole of the moon in 2020, to be staffed by advanced wheeled robots.

It initially considered sending a two-legged humanoid but judged a "rover-type" robot more practical due to the bumpy surface.

The group estimates the unmanned mission would cost 200 billion yen (two billion dollars) over the next 10 years, which could be a problem given government efforts to cut expenditure.

The panel will soon submit its report to Transport Minister Seiji Maehara, who is in charge of space exploration, a government official said.

The report will then be discussed at the Strategic Headquarters for Space Policy, chaired by Prime Minister Naoto Kan.

Japan's [space development](#) got a major boost this year when an unmanned probe returned from a seven-year trip to a distant asteroid and also from the success of a voyage by a "space yacht" powered only by sunlight.

The nation's closest ally, the United States, plans to cancel a programme to return Americans to the moon by 2020.

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