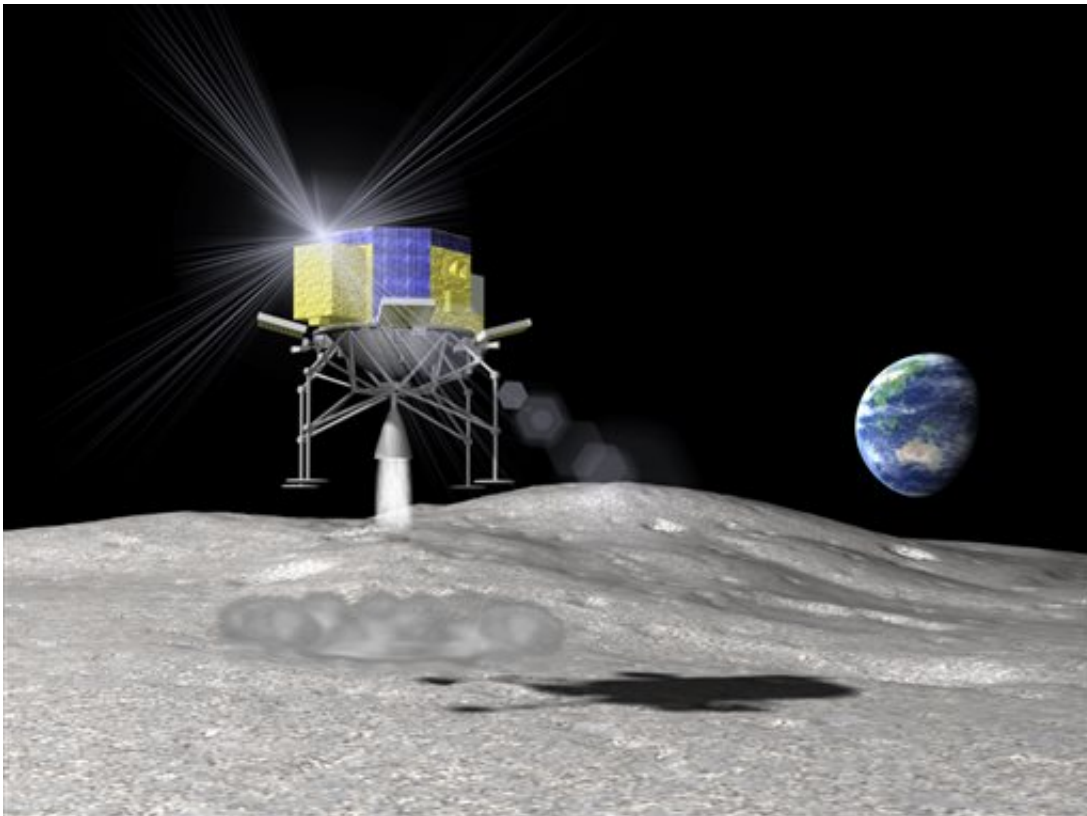


Japan mulls 2018 moon landing, seeks to keep up with rivals

April 21 2015, by Elaine Kurtenbach



In this artist rendering released by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, or JAXA, Monday, April 20, 2015, the space explorer named SLIM (Smart Lander for Investigating Moon) lands on the moon. Japan's space agency is considering an unmanned mission to the moon by 2018 or early 2019, part of an effort to beef up aerospace technology and keep pace with China and other emerging powers. The JAXA included the possibility of a lunar landing in the fiscal year that begins April 1, 2018, in its summary of moon exploration plans by Japan and other countries. (The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency via AP)

Japan's space agency is considering an unmanned mission to the moon by 2018 or early 2019, part of an effort to beef up aerospace technology and keep pace with China and other emerging powers.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, or JAXA, included the possibility of a lunar landing in the fiscal year that begins April 1, 2018, in its summary of moon exploration plans by Japan and other countries.

Japanese media reported Tuesday that JAXA presented the proposal to a government panel of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology on Monday.

The agency still needs to win funding for the project. But it is raising hopes for a revival of space exploration. And the public broadcaster NHK showed satellite images of the Japanese islands, alit at night, and of the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights, as possible attractions for passengers of space flights.

Japan has long been one of the world's leading space-faring nations and was the first Asian country, in 1970, to put a satellite into orbit around the Earth.

But in recent years the program has been crimped by a shoestring budget—unlike many space programs, it cannot rely on military budgets or projects to develop its rocket capabilities.

A mission to Mars in 1998 that was plagued by technical glitches failed and was finally abandoned in 2003.

In the meantime, China has made big strides, putting astronauts into space as the third country to send a human into orbit after Russia and the United States. Japan's space program has never attempted manned flight, though Japanese astronauts have been on the International Space Station.

JAXA has been reorganized and is seeking to expand its programs, teaming up with the Science and Technology Agency. The outline for international space exploration issued last week sets a goal for Japan to lead the U.S. and other countries in some areas in coming years.

Money has remained tight: the agency is expecting a total budget of 184 billion yen (\$1.5 billion) in this fiscal year, slightly above last year's 181.5 billion yen but on a par with its budget five years ago.

Still, the agency appears to be getting a boost from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's push to develop technologies with defense applications.

"There are areas of unlimited potential yet to be developed, and to boost controls of future threats it is important to minimize the power vacuum in space exploration," the document says.

It forecasts increased competition for resources on the moon, and also risks from a possible "power imbalance" as Russia, China, India and other countries prepare for missions to the moon.

"A revival of competition and cooperation in moon exploration adds to the imperative for us to quickly achieve moon exploration," it said, calling for consideration of an unmanned moon landing, among other goals.

The agency's longer-term proposal includes several phases for moon exploration, including stationing robotic and remote-controlled probes to take measurements and study various aspects of the moon, such as energy, dust, seismology and topography. The final phase, from 2025 on, includes the possibility of manned visits to the moon, based on international cooperation.

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