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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Lunar Governance Should Be Multilateral

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Lunar Governance Should Be Multilateral

 The Hindu

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"As Artemis II marks the return of humans to the Moon, who governs lunar resources? Should India sign the Artemis Accords or push for a stronger multilateral framework under UN COPUOS?"

THE CORE ARGUMENT

As the **Artemis II mission** (NASA, April 2026) marks humanity's first crewed return to the lunar orbit in over 50 years, the absence of binding **multilateral** governance over lunar resources is becoming a strategic liability. The existing framework — primarily the **Outer Space Treaty (1967)** and the U.S.-led **Artemis Accords** — is fragmented, non-binding, and dominated by spacefaring powers. The editorial argues that lunar governance must be grounded in a **UN COPUOS-led multilateral treaty** — not **bilateral** or **plurilateral** arrangements — to prevent a "land grab" that reproduces terrestrial geopolitical rivalries in space.

WHAT'S AT STAKE — LUNAR RESOURCES

The Moon is not just a scientific destination. It holds resources of enormous strategic value:

RESOURCE	LOCATION	SIGNIFICANCE
Water ice	Permanently Shadowed Regions (PSRs) — poles	Electrolysis → hydrogen (fuel) + oxygen (life support); essential for Moon base
Helium-3	Lunar regolith	Potential fusion reactor fuel (very rare on Earth)
Rare earth elements	Lunar crust	Neodymium, europium, gadolinium — critical for electronics
Titanium, silicon	Abundant in regolith	In-situ resource utilisation (ISRU) for construction
Platinum-group metals	Impact craters	High-value catalysts, electronics

The **South Pole** (target of India’s Chandrayaan-3 and NASA’s Artemis programme) has the highest concentration of water ice — making it the most contested lunar territory.

THE EXISTING LEGAL FRAMEWORK — AND ITS GAPS

Outer Space Treaty (OST) — 1967

PROVISION	TEXT	IMPLICATION
Article I	Space is “province of all mankind”; exploration for benefit of all	Non-exclusive access in principle
Article II	No national appropriation of celestial bodies by claim of sovereignty	States cannot claim territory
Article VI	States responsible for national activities including private actors	Government liability for commercial space companies
Article IX	Due regard; harmful contamination prohibition	Weak enforcement

Gap: Article II prohibits **state sovereignty** over lunar territory but does NOT explicitly address **resource extraction** by private companies. The U.S. Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act (2015) and the UAE Space Law explicitly permit companies to **own resources they extract** — a position contested by many nations.

The Moon Agreement (1979) — The Unratified Treaty

The **Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies (Moon Agreement, 1979)** declared the Moon and its resources the “**Common Heritage of Mankind**” — requiring an international regime for resource management before exploitation.

Problem: The Moon Agreement has been signed/ratified by only 18 states — NOT including the USA, Russia, China, India, or any major spacefaring nation. It has effectively failed.

Artemis Accords (2020, USA-led)

The **Artemis Accords** are bilateral agreements between the U.S. and partner nations:

PROVISION	SIGNIFICANCE
Peaceful purposes	No military weapons on Moon
Transparency	Share scientific data
Interoperability	Compatible systems
Safety zones	Each operator establishes “safety/exclusion zones” around operations
Resource extraction	Permits extraction and ownership of resources
Registration	Consistent with OST registration

Signatories (as of 2026): 40+ countries — including Japan, UK, UAE, South Korea, Canada, Brazil, Australia, France, Germany, India (signed 2023).

India’s Position: India signed the Artemis Accords in June 2023 — a pragmatic step toward NASA collaboration (NISAR satellite, astronaut training). However, India has not abandoned its position favouring stronger multilateral governance.

Critical Issue: “Safety zones” can function as de facto territorial claims — a spacefaring nation establishes an exclusion zone around its mining operation, effectively controlling that lunar area without formal sovereignty claim.

CHINA-RUSSIA RESPONSE — THE ILRS FRAMEWORK

International Lunar Research Station (ILRS): China and Russia’s alternative to Artemis:

ILRS PARAMETER	DETAIL
Lead countries	China (CNSA) + Russia (Roscosmos)
Other partners	Venezuela, Pakistan, UAE (partial), several African nations
Target	Permanent robotic + crewed Moon base at South Pole by 2035-40
Governance	Bilateral MOUs; no multilateral treaty
Resource framework	Not specified

The ILRS creates a parallel architecture — meaning **two competing blocs** racing for the same South Pole water ice deposits, with no agreed rules on how to share or allocate resources.

THE MULTILATERAL GOVERNANCE DEFICIT

UN COPUOS — The Legitimate Forum

COPUOS (Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space):

- 102 member states (as of 2026)
- Negotiated the major space law treaties (OST, Moon Agreement, Liability Convention)
- Has a Legal Subcommittee and Scientific Subcommittee
- HQ: Vienna (UNOOSA — UN Office for Outer Space Affairs)

Why COPUOS, not Artemis Accords?

- 1 Universal membership (102 countries vs. 40+ Artemis signatories)
- 2 UN authority confers binding treaty-making capacity
- 3 “Common Heritage of Mankind” principle from UNCLOS (seabed mining) offers precedent
- 4 Prevents great-power monopoly on lunar resources

UNCLOS as Model

The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) established the **International Seabed Authority (ISA)** to govern deep-sea mining — an area beyond national jurisdiction. The editorial argues a similar **International Lunar Authority (ILA)** is needed.

INDIA'S STAKE AND OPPORTUNITY

India is uniquely positioned:

- **Chandrayaan-3 (2023):** First soft landing near the lunar South Pole — India has demonstrated lunar capability
- **Gaganyaan (2024-25):** India’s human spaceflight programme
- **Artemis Accords signatory:** Operational relationship with NASA
- **BRICS/Global South voice:** India can champion multilateral governance without being purely aligned with either bloc

India can use its position in both the Artemis framework and BRICS/UN to **bridge the two blocs** and push for a COPUOS-led lunar governance treaty.

UPSC ANGLE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — IR	Artemis Accords, COPUOS, UNOOSA, multilateralism, space governance
GS3 — S&T	Moon resources, Chandrayaan, ISRO, lunar South Pole, helium-3
GS3 — S&T	Outer Space Treaty 1967, Moon Agreement 1979, ILRS vs Artemis
GS2 — IR	India’s space diplomacy, BRICS, global commons

Mains Keywords: Artemis Accords, Outer Space Treaty 1967, Moon Agreement 1979, COPUOS, UNOOSA, Common Heritage of Mankind, Chandrayaan-3, ILRS, Safety zones, UNCLOS, International Seabed Authority, helium-3, water ice

Probable Question: “The Artemis Accords undermine multilateral outer space governance. Critically analyse India’s position.” (GS2 Mains)

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