

OUTER SPACE LESSONS

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As scientists at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) work toward 'Mission Gaganyaan', to send three Indian astronauts into space, one can't but make comparisons with the U.S.'s lunar mission in the 1960s. At the time, U.S. President John F. Kennedy made a public statement about his administration's determination to place an American on the moon by the end of that decade. His speech was against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's progress as the foremost power in space, and after cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's feat of becoming the first human being in space (April 1961).

The U.S.'s objective, therefore, was to have a definite public-relations edge over the U.S.S.R. in the space race, which was marked then by intense rivalry between two Cold War powers. A breakthrough in space was thus a matter of prestige. In the context of ISRO's plan, the prestige value of 'Mission Gaganyaan' is sky-high, possibly in the same league as the American National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Apollo Mission to the moon.

A key lesson for India from NASA's lunar mission is that a programme of that scale and magnitude often comes at a steep cost, monetary and non-monetary. More than the monetary loss, it is the non-monetary loss that matters more, as it can lend currency to the idea that such a failure indicates a waste of time and resources. A failed mission deeply hurts the image of the country in the eyes of the outside world. It raises doubts about the capability of the nation-state in question. No nation-state ever wants to such face such a dilemma. This is because such a development would play to the advantage of adversaries, politically and diplomatically. Politically, a failed mission of such magnitude could give voices in the opposition an opportunity to level criticism, perhaps weakening the incumbent domestically. The diplomatic costs arise from the fact that losses in space missions can seriously impact the future of cooperation between space powers.

For instance, during the Cold War, both the U.S. and the then U.S.S.R. exaggerated each other's failures in space missions considerably in order to influence the overall mood among and inclinations of other nations in their favour. This was most easily achieved by making the rival look as weak as possible. Historically, the media played an active role in participating in such an agenda-driven propaganda.

Outer space is often referred to as the 'final frontier' by major world powers, with the prize for conquering it being even more greatness on the world stage. While India's credentials were bolstered after the successful anti-satellite mission recently, significant success in 'Mission Gaganyaan' might provide India with that stamp of authority in outer space that it so keenly desires. For that to happen, the lessons from the experiences of other space powers must be heeded.

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