

Whitepaper

# After the ISS:

## The new geography of low Earth orbit

The next era will be defined by who  
can turn access, alliances and  
demand into durable advantage

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About this paper: This paper draws on government and agency publications, company updates, independent analysis and the research reports supplied for this project. Information is current to August 2026. Company and government dates are treated as targets unless the underlying milestone has been completed. Market models are used to test assumptions and should not be read as forecasts.

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# Executive takeaways



The International Space Station will not be replaced by another International Space Station. What comes next will be less unified, more commercial and more political: several destinations, different access models and competing centres of influence.

That changes the question. The issue is no longer which company will build the successor to the ISS. It is who will control access to low Earth orbit, who will pay for the infrastructure, and which countries will help write the rules.

The United States has the deepest pipeline of commercial station concepts. China has something more immediate: an operational station, a regular flight rhythm and a growing international research programme. India and Russia are pursuing sovereign platforms. Europe, Japan and Canada are deciding whether to buy access, own selected capabilities or help shape commercial platforms from within. The post-ISS era is already becoming a contest between different models of power, extending well beyond the spacecraft themselves.

## Role shift



Government is not leaving LEO. It is changing roles, from station owner to anchor customer, regulator, investor and risk-sharer.

## Strategic access



Access will become strategic infrastructure. Countries that do not own a station will still need to decide what they must control: transport, cargo return, robotics or data.

## China's head start



China begins the transition with an operational advantage. Tiangong gives Beijing a platform from which to expand research ties while US providers develop hardware.

## Market reality



The market may not support several identical, privately financed stations at once. The strongest models will combine public commitments and disciplined capacity.

## Network competition



Competition will happen across a whole network, extending beyond the stations themselves. Transport, robotics, data services and cargo return may matter as much as the destination.



The winners in post-ISS LEO will not necessarily be those that launch the most hardware. They will be those that turn infrastructure into dependable access, access into alliances, and alliances into recurring demand.

# The ISS is ending. The old model is ending with it

As the ISS retires, its functions are about to be split between different companies, contracts and governments for the first time.

For more than two decades, the ISS has made human activity in LEO look like a single programme. It combines laboratories, transport, crew operations, emergency procedures, research support, liability arrangements and international diplomacy. Users rarely see how many institutions sit behind a successful experiment or astronaut mission.

Commercialisation pulls those functions apart. A future customer may buy transport from one company, station time from another, payload integration from a third and insurance through a separate market. A partner government may contribute robotics or cargo rather than a laboratory module. Responsibility will be distributed across contracts and regulators instead of concentrated in one intergovernmental programme.

This is why simply asking whether a station will be in orbit by the end of the ISS is too narrow. The better question is whether a usable system will exist. Can researchers secure crew time and sample return? Can foreign governments buy repeat missions on transparent terms? Is there a rescue plan? Can an operator finance recurring service rather than one demonstration flight?

NASA wants commercial stations to take over when the ISS retires, but the transition may be uneven. A 2026 Government Accountability Office (GAO) review found that the agency had yet to assess the likelihood and possible duration of a gap. It also noted that the first commercial stations would offer less capacity than the ISS. A station could therefore be in orbit while researchers and international partners still face limited access.



A market-making experiment

NASA intends to replace ownership with procurement. As of August 2026, it was preparing a Phase 2 competition designed to support more than one provider through early development and then compete later task orders. This is a sensible way to preserve options. It is not proof that several full-scale stations can survive commercially.

That distinction matters. NASA can fund several designs, buy more than one demonstration and still discover that recurring demand initially supports only one major provider. The objective should be a

contestable market with credible alternatives over time, without paying permanent subsidy for empty duplicate capacity.

The same logic applies internationally. China, India and Russia are using sovereign programmes to secure national capability. Europe and Japan are leaning toward commercial access while protecting selected industrial and operational strengths. These are not variations on one model. They are different answers to the question of how much autonomy is worth paying for.

Table 1  
The emerging global LEO models

| Actor                                                                                               | Primary model                                               | Current position                                                         | Strategic dependency                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br>United States  | Buy services from commercial destinations                   | Phase 2 procurement in draft; multiple concepts maturing                 | NASA anchor demand, transport, certification and private finance        |
| <br>China        | Sovereign station with selected international access        | Tiangong operational; expansion and research pipeline announced          | State programme continuity and terms for foreign access                 |
| <br>India        | Staged sovereign station plus commercial learning           | BAS-1 approved; five-module 2035 target                                  | Gaganyaan execution, funding of later modules and domestic supply chain |
| <br>Russia       | Sovereign orbital station                                   | Included in national space project; detailed baseline remains uncertain  | Funding, industry, sanctions and ISS transition                         |
| <br>Europe       | Commercial access plus enabling autonomy                    | ESA pursuing post-ISS services, cargo return and possible infrastructure | Rights secured through procurement and industrial contribution          |
| <br>Japan        | Commercial access through Japanese providers                | Policy direction defined; demand-building work under way                 | US destinations, HTV-X heritage and domestic intermediaries             |
| <br>Canada       | Industrial contribution and purchased access                | MDA Space equity and robotics role in Starlab                            | Conversion of workshare into durable government access                  |
| <br>Other states | Astronaut, payload, module or enabling-service partnerships | Growing mission and investment interest                                  | Transparent terms, repeatability and geopolitical access                |

# America has the companies. China has the station

Two very different strategies are now competing for control of low Earth orbit, one built on private competition, the other on state control.

The US-China comparison captures the central tension in the transition. The United States is betting that competition and private capital can produce a more innovative LEO economy. China is using a state-led station to build continuity, research capacity and international relationships now.

Neither model is automatically superior. The US approach can create specialisation and cost discipline, but it must cross a difficult gap between development awards and profitable operations. China's approach provides continuity and clear state backing, but access remains tied to government policy and geopolitical relationships. The strategic

advantage will belong to the model that turns capacity into a durable ecosystem.

## The US portfolio is a strength, and a warning

The four leading US concepts are often grouped together, but their approaches are materially different. Axiom is trying to bridge from an ISS-attached module to a free-flying station. Starlab is concentrating a large destination into a single launch. Orbital Reef remains a modular, multi-partner platform. Vast is pursuing a smaller pathfinder-led route.

Table 2

### US commercial destination concepts

| Programme                                                                                                   | Architecture                                                  | Evidence of progress                                               | Principal advantage                                          | Main execution question                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <br><b>Axiom Station</b> | Modules first attached to ISS, then separated as a free-flyer | Design and fabrication milestones; four private ISS missions flown | Operational bridge from ISS and customer-mission experience  | Can modules, separation and financing stay aligned with the ISS timeline? |
| <br><b>Starlab</b>       | Large single-launch free-flyer                                | NASA commercial critical design review completed Feb 2026          | Lower on-orbit assembly; multinational industrial consortium | Can station, launch vehicle and service schedule mature together?         |
| <br><b>Orbital Reef</b>  | Modular free-flyer with multiple partners                     | NASA-funded design, testing and human-in-the-loop milestones       | Flexible ecosystem and partner breadth                       | Can integration, transport, scope and financing converge?                 |
| <br><b>Vast / Haven</b>  | Smaller pathfinder-led progression                            | Haven Demo flown; NASA private mission selected for summer 2027    | Potentially faster learning loop and lower initial scope     | How quickly can a small platform scale to reliable service?               |

Progress is real. Axiom has reported fabrication and pressure-test milestones. Starlab completed its commercial critical design review with NASA in February 2026. NASA and Blue Origin have reported design and human-in-the-loop work on Orbital Reef. Vast flew Haven Demo and has been selected for a NASA private astronaut mission no earlier than summer 2027.



**But the decisive evidence is still ahead: integrated life support, fault tolerance, launch readiness, transport agreements, certification, finance and binding customers.**

### China is shaping demand while others debate supply

Tiangong is the most credible non-US destination because it already exists. China has sustained crew and cargo operations, built a large research pipeline and announced plans to expand capacity. That gives Beijing a base from which to offer research access and deepen relationships with emerging space nations.

The international programme is still modest compared with the ISS, but its direction is clear. China and UNOOSA selected nine experiment projects involving institutions from 17 Member States. Pakistan has also described plans to train and send an astronaut to Tiangong. These initiatives turn station access into a form of scientific and diplomatic influence.

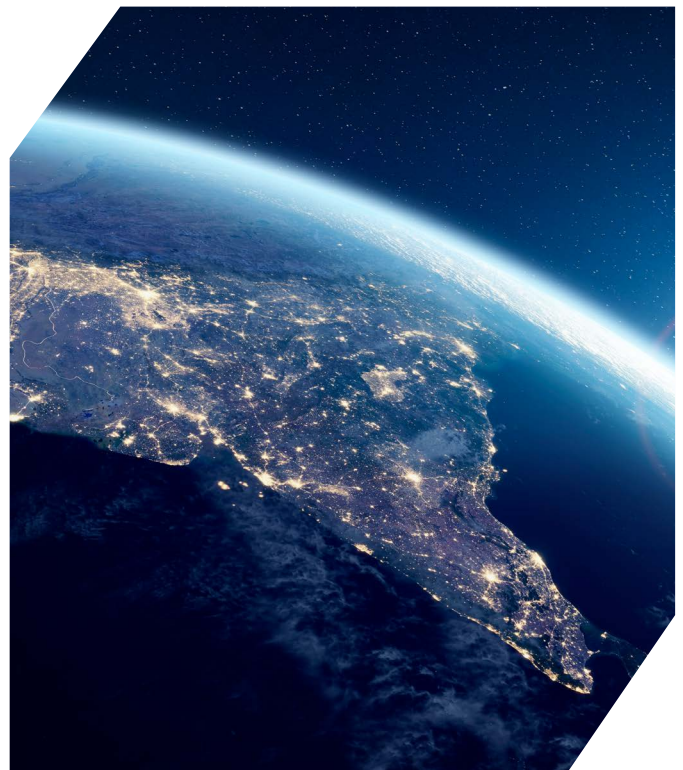
The West should not respond by treating every international research relationship as a bloc contest. That would shrink the global market and make scientific cooperation harder. The more effective response is to offer attractive, transparent and repeatable alternatives.

### India and Russia are rebuilding sovereign options

India has approved the first Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS) module for a target launch by 2028 and describes a five-module station by 2035. Only the first module is currently approved, so the 2035 architecture should be understood as a direction rather than a funded certainty.

India's most persuasive path is hybrid. Commercial missions can build astronaut, research and operational experience before BAS is available, while Gaganyaan, India's first human spaceflight mission, and BAS create a sovereign core. India's participation in Axiom Mission 4 illustrates how partnership can accelerate autonomy rather than weaken it.

Russia retains deep station experience and plans a Russian Orbital Station, but published timelines and funding are difficult to separate from the wider national space programme. Headline figures of roughly RUB 4.5 trillion cover far more than the station. Russia's eventual relationship with China is strategically important, but closer station cooperation remains a scenario rather than an announced architecture.



## Europe, Japan and Canada are choosing how much autonomy to buy

Europe does not need to own an entire station to remain influential. It does need to decide which capabilities it cannot prudently outsource. Cargo return, robotics, payload integration, crew training, secure communications and a European element can each provide leverage if they come with strong access rights.

The European Space Agency's (ESA) plans combine commercial procurement with possible infrastructure contributions and a European cargo-return service. This is strategically useful because cargo can serve more than one destination. It creates an independent capability without locking Europe into the cost of a complete station.

Japan is taking a similarly pragmatic route. Its 2025 policy work assumes access to mainly US commercial stations through Japanese service providers, while JAXA continues to support national research and technical capability. Japanese workshops also reveal the real demand problem: potential customers find prices opaque, integration difficult and the value proposition unclear. Solving that commercial interface may matter more than adding another laboratory rack.

Canada's clearest current bet is industrial. MDA Space is an equity owner and robotics partner in Starlab. The next question is political: how will industrial contribution translate into durable astronaut and research access?



# The real contest is for demand

However advanced a station looks on paper, its future depends on something far less visible: a durable base of paying customers.

Most station presentations begin with architecture. The harder issue is who will pay to use it, how often and for what.

There is credible demand for government research, astronaut missions and technology demonstrations. ISS research has produced publications, patents and commercial learning. A 2025 study found that ISS-related research outputs received more citations than selected Earth-based comparisons, while cautioning that the results did not prove causality. This supports the value of microgravity research. It does not by itself create a bankable market.

The value of an experiment may flow to patients, scientists, national security or the wider economy rather than to the station operator. Governments will therefore remain essential buyers even if stations are commercially owned. NASA's Low Earth Orbit Microgravity Strategy already treats sustained access as a portfolio of public and commercial goals. Public money will remain part of the system. The real test is whether procurement builds a genuine service market or leaves a small group of contractors dependent on government spending.

## Private demand will not rescue weak business models

Research customers face long lead times, uncertain end-to-end costs and scarce downmass. In-space manufacturing is promising, but most projects remain at demonstration stage. A 2025 survey found roughly 1,000 organisations across the in-space economy, yet only about 10 per cent had performed orbital demonstrations or were active; recurring commercial revenues remained limited.

Tourism is useful but narrow. Four Axiom private missions had flown to the ISS by July 2025, proving that a small market exists. It is not yet evidence of the steady volume needed to carry the fixed costs of several large stations.

Figure 1

In-space manufacturing shows promise, but most projects remain at demonstration stage



of roughly 1,000 in-space economy organisations surveyed in 2025 had conducted orbital demonstrations or were active



Operators should separate demand into three categories: government commitments, binding commercial contracts and non-binding interest. Only the first two should drive capacity decisions.

One station may close financially. Several may matter strategically.

The tension between economics and resilience sits at the centre of US policy. One station serving most of NASA’s demand may produce a credible business case. Two similar stations splitting the same demand may struggle.

Governments should concentrate competition where it creates real value: transport, modules, payload services, logistics, software and recurring service contracts. Open interfaces and regular procurement rounds can give new providers a route into the market. This can preserve competitive pressure even if only one large destination is operating at a given time.

Transport is the price of admission

A station’s price is only one part of a customer’s bill. Crew launch, cargo, training, payload integration, insurance and sample return may dominate the

mission cost. A lower-cost station cannot create a mass market if transport remains scarce or unpredictable.

This makes transport policy part of station policy. Governments should publish integrated demand, qualify more than one cargo path where practical and insist on docking interoperability. They should also be sceptical of claims that lower launch prices automatically create lower human-spaceflight prices. Safety, training and mission operations do not disappear.

Insurance is another important constraint. A 2024 NASA study found limited private-market capacity to cover the full value of commercial crewed stations and considered options ranging from partial insurance to a possible government backstop. Any public support should be capped, priced and tied to strong safety incentives. Commercial ownership should not become a route to socialising avoidable losses.

Table 3  
Variables that can change station viability

| Variable                   | If stronger than expected                             | If weaker than expected                              | Policy implication                                                  |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anchor demand              | Supports financing and fixed-cost recovery            | Creates underused capacity and refinancing risk      | Use credible minimum commitments and transparent demand forecasts   |
| Non-government demand      | Allows specialisation and additional providers        | Leaves operators dependent on one agency             | Stage capacity; count contracts rather than expressions of interest |
| Transport cost and cadence | Widens the customer pool and utilisation              | Consumes customer budgets and limits missions        | Treat crew, cargo and downmass as part of the market design         |
| Capital and insurance      | Improves returns and permits redundancy               | Raises required revenue and delays deployment        | Use milestone support and carefully limited risk-sharing            |
| Shared infrastructure      | Reduces duplication; supports entry at service layers | Can create public lock-in or single point of failure | Open interfaces, neutral access rules and performance obligations   |
| Schedule                   | Preserves workforce and customer continuity           | Creates bridge costs and research disruption         | Pre-agree contingency decisions and capability triage               |

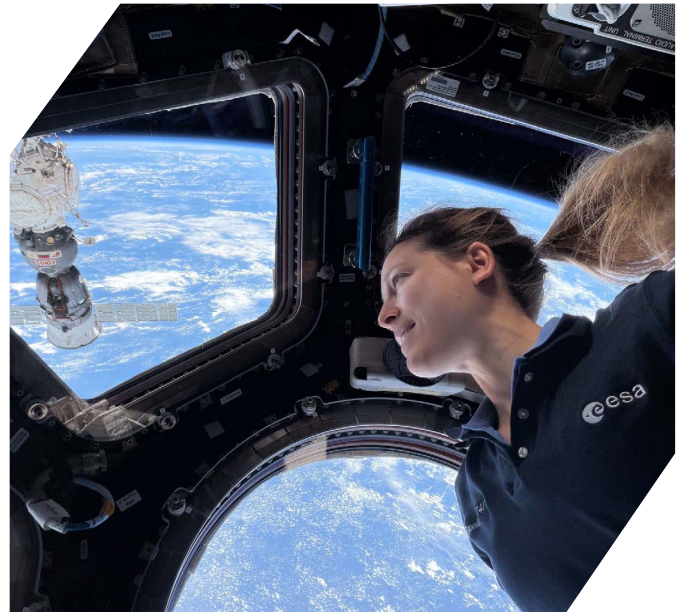
# Access is becoming an instrument of power

Access to orbit could open the system up to more countries, but only if participation comes with real rights, not just a seat at the table.

The ISS made partnership visible through modules and flags. Commercial stations will make it visible through contracts, equity, technology and access rights.

For a government, buying an astronaut flight is not the same as securing a long-term research programme. Supplying robotics is not the same as owning a module. Owning a module is not the same as controlling transport. Each choice creates a different level of influence and dependence.

This is especially important for middle powers and emerging space nations. A one-off astronaut mission can inspire the public and build human-spaceflight experience. A recurring payload programme develops universities and companies. An industrial contribution can build a national supply chain. A sovereign station maximises control but carries the highest financial and utilisation risk.



Sophie Adenot and the European Space Agency

Table 4

## Participation choices for partner and emerging space states

| Model                          | What it buys                                            | Strength                                                | Limitation                                                              |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Payload access</b>          | Experiment integration, operations and data             | Lowest entry cost; supports universities and firms      | Little influence over station governance or crew access                 |
| <b>Astronaut mission</b>       | Training, transport and a short-duration crewed mission | High public visibility and human-spaceflight experience | Episodic unless linked to a research and workforce programme            |
| <b>Industrial contribution</b> | Module, robotics, cargo, communications or services     | Builds domestic capability and can secure workshare     | Access rights must be explicit; contribution may depend on one platform |
| <b>Sovereign station</b>       | National control of infrastructure and schedule         | Maximum autonomy and strategic signalling               | Highest fixed cost, technical burden and utilisation risk               |

There is also an opportunity for joint procurement. Regional groups, universities or research consortia could aggregate payload demand and negotiate repeat access. This would give smaller customers more bargaining power and reduce the cost of bespoke integration.



Countries should decide what they are actually buying before they announce a partnership. Access without clear rights can be more symbolic than strategic.

### Keeping LEO open

The post-ISS system could widen participation. Commercial operators have an incentive to sell unused capacity, and sovereign programmes can use access to build international relationships. But it could also divide LEO into blocs shaped by export controls, data rules and political alignment.

Openness will not happen automatically. It will require transparent prices, repeatable application processes, interoperable hardware and baseline protections for research data. Export controls and spectrum rules can make a technically compatible system difficult to use across borders. Countries that want an open market must build one that is easier to use than the alternatives.



# Rules will become infrastructure

A station's fate will often be decided by licences, treaties and overlapping national rules long before physics or finance come into play.

Commercial stations will sit at the centre of rules covering launch and re-entry, human safety, spectrum, export controls, cybersecurity, data, intellectual property, debris and corporate ownership. Government contracts will add another layer. During the market's early years, the requirements imposed by anchor customers such as NASA, ESA and JAXA may shape industry practice as much as formal regulation.

This matters commercially. Regulatory uncertainty raises the cost of capital, incompatible national rules restrict the customer base, and unallocated liability can stop missions altogether. Regulation will help determine which stations are bankable and internationally usable.



## One station will connect several jurisdictions

Article VI of the Outer Space Treaty requires states to authorise and continually supervise non-governmental activities. Article VIII links jurisdiction and control to the state of registry. A commercial station may connect several states through its operator, owners, registered modules, launching states, vehicles, crew, payloads and ground systems.

Those connections will change as modules are added, ownership changes and visiting vehicles arrive under different national authorities. Every station should therefore maintain a regulatory map identifying the responsible state and authority for each element. It should cover registration, supervision, crew and payload jurisdiction, emergency command, ownership changes and end-of-life responsibility.

The United States launched a voluntary Space Commerce Certification pilot in August 2026, offering a single application and interagency review for novel in-space activities. FAA, FCC and remote-sensing authorities retain their legal responsibilities, so the pilot remains a coordinating mechanism. The UK already licenses orbital operators, while the proposed EU Space Act would establish a common European baseline for safety, resilience and sustainability.

These systems can accept comparable evidence without becoming identical. A common mission dossier covering safety, financial responsibility, cybersecurity, debris mitigation and technical capability would reduce duplication across agencies and countries.

## Commercial stations need a new international compact

The ISS Intergovernmental Agreement offers useful tools, including cross-waivers, jurisdictional rules and intellectual-property provisions. Its institutional model was designed for governments jointly operating one programme. Commercial destinations will have changing customers, private owners and competing operators.

A standard commercial station framework agreement would provide a more flexible foundation. States could join it for particular operators or missions. It should address registration, jurisdiction, emergency authority, government inspection, cross-waivers, export controls, intellectual property, disputes, withdrawal and operator failure. Operators could then place their own customer contracts beneath that common framework.

## Human safety cannot rest on informed consent

Commercial stations will carry government astronauts, operator employees, researchers and private passengers. An informed-consent regime designed around launch and re-entry is inadequate for people living and working in orbit.

Common rules are needed for habitability, life support, crew competence, medical screening, exposure limits, emergency training and incident reporting. They should also define when an operator may refuse a customer, stop an experiment or order an evacuation.

Rescue planning is the clearest test of interoperability. The International Docking System Standard provides a shared technical foundation, but vehicles and stations still require compatible implementations, operational data and joint exercises. Operators and customer states should agree evacuation thresholds, safe-haven capacity, medical authority, rescue priorities, liability and cost before each mission.

## Liability will shape the architecture

International law determines when states may face claims. Contracts, insurance, indemnities and cross-waivers allocate losses among operators, customers and suppliers. One accident could trigger a state-to-state claim, customer litigation, insurance recovery and disputes between module and vehicle operators.

Insurance capacity is already constrained. NASA found that the space-insurance pool available for asset cover typically ranges from \$400 million to \$700 million, while proposed destinations are expected to cost well over \$1 billion.

Governments should establish minimum financial-responsibility requirements before stations enter service. Any public catastrophe backstop should be capped, priced and conditional on compliance. Cross-waivers must extend through operators, customers, contractors and payload providers, with clear treatment of third-party damage and serious misconduct.



Expedition 68 crew members pose in the crowded Columbus laboratory on the International Space Station in January 2023. From left: Dmitri Petelin and Anna Kikina, both from Roscosmos, and Nicole Mann from NASA. (Image credit: NASA)

## Spectrum, cybersecurity and export controls are operational constraints

Stations will need communications for command, telemetry, broadband, payload data and visiting vehicles. These links require national authorisations and, where applicable, ITU coordination. Spectrum planning must reflect the station's full operating model from the outset.

The ground segment requires comparable scrutiny. Rules should address secure command systems, segregated payload networks, software updates, supply-chain assurance, cyber-incident reporting and the addition of new ground stations.

Export controls will determine who can build modules, enter restricted areas and receive technical data. Operators need a practical process for screening customers, personnel, experiments and data against export controls, sanctions and national-security requirements. Payload approval must also cover hazardous materials, biological samples, remote sensing and dual-use research.

Data and intellectual-property rules will shape research demand. Standard contracts should address background and foreground IP, publication rights, confidentiality, controlled information and medical or biometric data. Governments funding research should publish baseline clauses rather than renegotiate these issues for every payload.

## The licence must survive the business plan

Regulatory obligations must continue through changes of ownership, financial distress and disposal. Collision avoidance, passivation and controlled re-entry require funding even if an operator loses its principal customer.

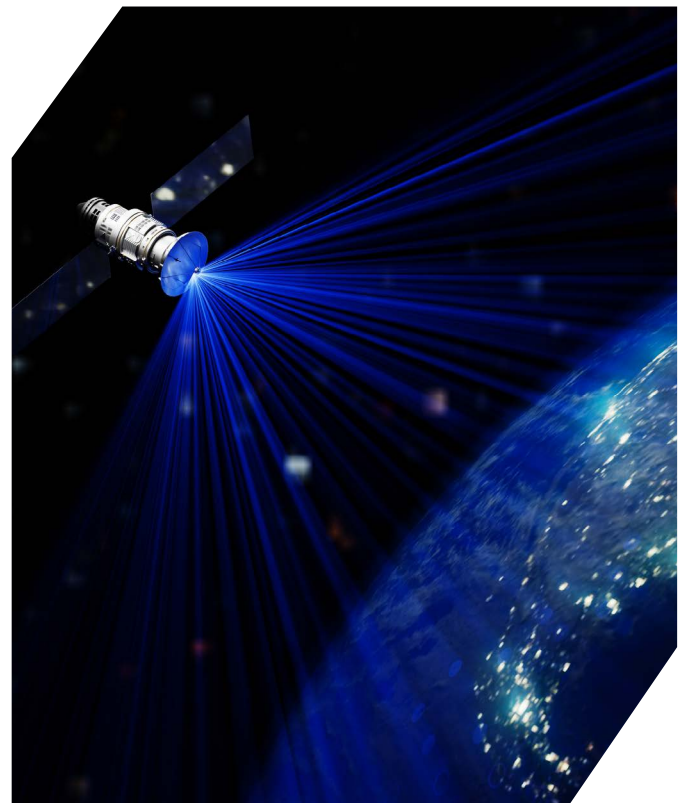
Licences should therefore include an approved end-of-life plan backed by a reserve, bond, insurance policy or parent guarantee. Agreements must identify who can command, service or deorbit a station if its operator can no longer do so.

## Regulatory interoperability should become the objective

Progress can come through compatible national licences, mutual recognition of evidence, standard contracts and a reusable agreement between participating states. Policymakers should now prioritise:

1. A lead regulator and published approval pathway for each operator.
2. A common safety and rescue assurance case.
3. A model agreement covering jurisdiction, liability and emergency authority.
4. Transparent insurance, indemnification and end-of-life requirements.
5. Standard terms for payloads, cybersecurity, data and publicly funded research.

Commercial stations will connect vehicles, laboratories, customers and governments. Their rules must connect just as effectively. Regulatory interoperability will be part of the infrastructure.



# The post-ISS market is still being made

Nobody yet knows what the market for orbital stations will look like by the middle of the next decade, and several paths remain open.

ISS retirement will expose a market still being built. Two forces will shape it: the depth of demand and the openness of access. Demand will determine how many destinations can survive. Geopolitics, regulation and technical standards will determine whether customers, vehicles and research can move between them.

Together, these forces create four plausible futures:



Table 5

Four possible space station markets in 2035

| Future                              | What it looks like                                                                                                                                                              | Early signposts                                                                                               | Preparation priority                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1<br/>Networked destinations</b> | Several stations serve government and commercial customers. Vehicles, payloads and research can move between platforms. Sovereign stations participate selectively.             | Multi-year customer contracts, transport diversity, common interfaces and recognition of safety requirements. | Mutual recognition, rescue agreements, open standards and coordinated procurement.                         |
| <b>2<br/>Anchor-led market</b>      | One commercial destination or consortium captures most Western government demand. Specialist platforms serve narrower markets, while China and India retain sovereign stations. | Competitor delays or exits, contracts concentrating around one provider and limited private demand.           | Open interfaces, competition in transport and payload services, price transparency and contingency access. |
| <b>3<br/>Strategic blocs</b>        | US-aligned, China-led and other sovereign systems develop separate supply chains, customers and data regimes. Movement between them is limited.                                 | Exclusive partnerships, tighter export controls, incompatible data rules and diverging standards.             | Preserve cooperation on rescue, debris, scientific data and other shared risks.                            |
| <b>4<br/>Constrained access</b>     | Replacement capacity arrives late or remains intermittent. A few national platforms operate, while smaller space nations and researchers struggle to secure access.             | Certification delays, weak customer commitments, transport bottlenecks and falling research budgets.          | Fund bridge access, retain specialist workforces and expand free-flyer and ground-based alternatives.      |

## The likely outcome is a mixture

The most likely outcome is a combination of these futures. An anchor-led commercial market could emerge among US partners while China, India and perhaps Russia maintain separate sovereign systems. Selective cooperation may continue in areas such as science and safety even as supply chains, data rules and crew access become more politically divided.

A capability gap cuts across every scenario. Adequate capacity may exist by 2035 and still arrive several years after the ISS retires. Launch dates alone will provide false reassurance. Governments need to track certification, transport availability, research throughput, contracted demand and partner access.

## What to do now

The post-ISS market is still being shaped. Decisions taken now on procurement, access rights, interoperability, regulation and investment will influence which systems become commercially sustainable and internationally usable. Different actors face different choices:

1. **Governments and space agencies** must define the capabilities that need to remain under national control and those that can be procured commercially. They should build credible multi-year demand around astronaut access, research, cargo and downmass, and make those requirements visible enough for industry to plan against them. They must preserve competition through open interfaces, multiple transport options and procurement structures that allow additional capacity to enter as demand grows. Governments should also establish clear contingency thresholds in case certified commercial capacity arrives later than planned.
2. **Station operators and investors** need to build capacity against contracted demand, rather than expressions of interest or optimistic market forecasts. Business cases should account for launch delays, transport costs, insurance constraints and the possible loss of a major government customer. Operators should make access easier to buy by simplifying payload integration, pricing, mission planning and customer support. The strongest platforms will be those that can turn complex human-spaceflight infrastructure into a repeatable service.
3. **Partner and emerging space nations** need to start by deciding what the country is trying to secure: research access, astronaut experience, industrial capability, strategic influence or sovereign capability. Access rights, mission frequency, data rights and industrial participation should be negotiated explicitly. Where national demand is too small to support regular missions, countries can aggregate payloads and procurement through regional, university or research partnerships.
4. **Regulators and international organisations** must make regulatory interoperability an objective before commercial architectures harden. Establish clear approval pathways, reusable evidence and common approaches to safety, rescue, liability, cybersecurity, spectrum and end-of-life obligations. International cooperation will remain particularly important for rescue, emergency response, debris mitigation and scientific activity, even where commercial systems and supply chains become more politically divided.
5. **The market is still open:** ISS retirement will produce a more varied system of crewed destinations. The United States will remain central to the commercial market, while China, India, Russia and other actors shape the wider system through sovereign capability, procurement and partnerships. Europe, Japan and Canada will influence the market through infrastructure, regulation, industrial participation and access agreements. Emerging space nations will help determine which models achieve international scale.

The defining competition will be between systems: transport, destinations, rules and customers working together. A useful system will offer reliable access, manageable prices and enough demand to sustain operations.

Governments need candour about the capabilities they are willing to fund. Companies need discipline about what customers will actually buy. International partners need to protect interoperability before commercial and political divisions harden. Success would leave the world with a broader and more resilient station ecosystem. Failure could produce several new stations while losing much of the shared access that made the ISS so valuable.

# How Access Partnership can help

Access Partnership works at the frontier of the space sector, helping turn an uncertain landscape into a clear plan.

The transition beyond the ISS will create new choices for governments, space agencies, investors and companies. Commercial viability, international access, regulation and geopolitical positioning will increasingly need to be considered together.

Access Partnership works across these questions, helping clients understand where the market is heading, what policy and regulatory decisions will shape it, and how to position themselves as the post-ISS ecosystem develops.

## Strategy and market development

We help governments and companies assess market opportunities, demand, competitive positioning and future scenarios across the space economy. This includes national space strategies, commercial market assessments, investment priorities and market-entry planning.

## Policy and regulatory strategy

We advise on the regulatory frameworks that enable space activity, including licensing, liability, safety, spectrum, sustainability, market access and cross-border operations. We also help clients engage with regulators and anticipate how emerging rules may affect their business models.

## International partnerships and access

We support governments, agencies and companies in developing international partnerships, structuring access strategies and identifying the capabilities that should be owned, procured or secured through collaboration.

## Commercial and stakeholder engagement

We help clients translate technical capability into credible market propositions, identify prospective customers and partners, engage policymakers and institutions, and build strategies around recurring demand.

## Space sustainability and governance

We advise on the policy, regulatory and governance questions created by an increasingly commercial and crowded space environment, including responsible operations, interoperability, end-of-life obligations and international coordination.



For support with commercial space strategy, regulation, market access or international partnerships:

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