

Europe launches study into manned spacecraft scheme

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Europe's Spaceport Ariane 5 ECA in Kourou, French Guyana. The European Space Agency (ESA) said it had taken an important first step in a tentative project to build a manned spacecraft that would be launched atop its Ariane 5 rocket.

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ESA officials signed a contract in the northern German city of Bremen on Tuesday with space company EADS Astrium to conduct a feasibility study into the idea, it said in a press release.

Europe does not have its own manned spaceflight capability, and instead depends on the US shuttle and Russia's [Soyuz rocket](#) to take its astronauts to the [International Space Station](#) (ISS).

Ministers of ESA countries agreed last November to explore ways of developing an "advanced re-entry vehicle" (ARV) that would be based on an unmanned freighter that made a successful maiden flight to the ISS last year.

Under its present design, the freighter is jettisoned and destroyed by friction with the atmosphere after its mission.

The ARV project would need to modify the vehicle so that it becomes a cargo ship that can return to Earth. In a second phase, the craft would be transformed into a crewship.

The contract is "a clear sign of Europe's commitment to play an even greater role in the global human spaceflight and exploration undertakings," said Simonetta Di Pippo, ESA's director of human spaceflight.

"We are building on our technological basis and achievements to position Europe in a more important role in this strategic field, leveraging on our industrial base and nurturing its highly skilled workforce. Today's signature is the first step of a journey that will be very rewarding for Europe."

If the political green light is given, and all goes well technically, the first return-to-Earth cargo ship could make its first flight around the middle of the next decade, and a manned version possibly a decade later, say experts.

Observers caution that the feasibility report will be scrutinised closely,

given the high costs of developing a manned spacecraft and concerns that the project could drain funds away from scientific research and Earth observation, which are ESA's mainstays.

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