

China to launch second lunar probe this weekend

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(AP) -- China's space ambitions are forging ahead with plans to launch the country's second unmanned lunar probe this weekend.

The Chang'e II probe will be shot into space sometime between Friday and Sunday aboard a Long March 3C rocket, state media reported.

Weather conditions at the Xichang launch center in the southwestern province of Sichuan will determine the exact time of launch, reports said.

Rain and occasional thunderstorms were forecast for Xichang beginning on Friday, which is also China's National Day. The country generally schedules major space launches for late summer and early autumn, when the weather over most of the country is generally clear.

The probe plans to test technology in preparation for an unmanned moon landing in 2012, with a possible manned [lunar mission](#) to follow in 2017.

China's other space plans include the launch of the first module of a future space station next year followed by the dispatch of manned spacecraft to dock with it.

China launched its first manned flight in 2003, joining Russia and the United States as the only countries to put humans into orbit. Two additional manned missions followed, with the most recent one in 2008 featuring the program's first-ever space walk.

The Chinese space program is marking new milestones even as those in the U.S. and elsewhere face tight budgets, although its close links to the military have limited cooperation with other nations - including the [International Space Station](#).

The Xinhua News Agency said Chang'e II would circle 62 miles (100 kilometers) above the moon before moving into an elliptical orbit just 9 miles (15 kilometers) above its surface.

It will film the anticipated landing site for the China-e III probe with its super-high resolution camera before returning to its higher orbit and carrying out an analysis of the lunar surface and surrounding space environment.

China's first [lunar probe](#), Chang'e I, was launched in 2007 and was intentionally crashed onto the [lunar surface](#) 16 months later to remove it from [space](#) and monitor the results of its demise.

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