China to explore Mars with Russia this year

January 2 2011

People pass in front of models of Long March rocket at the Sichuan Science and Technology Museum in Chengdu, southwestern China. The country's first Mars probe is expected to be launched in October this year in a joint operation with Russia after a two-year delay, state media reported Sunday.

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The probe, Yinghuo-1, was due to blast off in October 2009 with Russia's "Phobos Explorer" from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan but the launch was postponed, the official Xinhua news

agency said.

Quoting an unnamed expert at the China Academy of Space Technology, the report said the blast-off had been pushed back to October this year. It added that China planned to launch a Mars probe on its own in 2013.

According to previous reports, the orbiter is due to probe the Martian space environment with a special focus on what happened to the water that appears to have once been abundant on the planet's surface.

China has already begun probing the moon and this will be the next step in its ambitious space exploration programme, which it aims to be on a par with those of the United States and Russia.

It currently has a probe -- the Chang'e 2 -- orbiting the moon and carrying out various tests in preparation for the expected 2013 launch of the Chang'e-3, which it hopes will be its first unmanned lunar landing.

It also became the world's third nation to put a man in space independently -- after the United States and Russia -- when Yang Liwei piloted the one-man Shenzhou-5 space mission in 2003.