

Soyuz docks at ISS carrying Russian, US, Japanese astronauts

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A Soyuz TMA-02M carrying US astronaut Michael Fossum, Russian cosmonaut Sergey Volkov and Japanese astronaut Satoshi Furukawa blasts off from the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome early on June 8. A Soyuz spacecraft with a Russian, a US and a Japanese astronaut aboard docked Thursday at the International Space Station, the Russian control centre said.

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"The Soyuz TMA-02M spacecraft docked at the ISS automatically" around 1:20 am Moscow time on Friday (2120 GMT Thursday), said Valeri Lyndin, a spokesman for the Tsup control centre in a Moscow suburb.

The spacecraft carrying American Mike Fossum, Russian Sergei Volkov and Satoshi Furukawa of Japan had lifted off on Tuesday at about 2012 GMT from the launchpad at Baikonur, Kazakhstan.

The three join Russians Alexander Samokutyaev and Andrey Borisenko and American Ronald Garan. They will spend the next half year aboard the ISS.

Fossum is a veteran of two shuttle flights while Volkov has already had one stint aboard the ISS in 2008. Furukawa is making his first space flight.

The launch came just a month before NASA is scheduled to launch the space shuttle for the last time before it is taken out of service.

After the flight by the [space shuttle Atlantis](#), Russia's Soyuz [launch system](#) -- whose basic design has changed little since the dawn of human space flight -- will become the sole means for transporting humans to the ISS.

It is expected to be some years before NASA introduces a replacement for the Soyuz.

The extra pressure on the space programme coincides with a time of turbulence at Russia's space agency, which saw its long-serving head Anatoly Perminov fired by the government after a string of failures.

The Soyuz launch is Russia's first [manned space flight](#) under new Roskosmos chief Vladimir Popovkin after Perminov's sacking in April.

Popovkin faces the task of reforming an agency still reeling from its most embarrassing space failures in recent times in December when three navigation satellites crashed into the ocean instead of reaching

orbit.

This and other technical issues cast a shadow on the 50th anniversary year in 2011 of Yuri Gagarin's first space flight, still celebrated in Russia as one of its greatest achievements.

Russia is now using a new version of the [Soyuz spacecraft](#) that has been the lynchpin of Moscow's space programme over the last decades.

The new spacecraft has a new onboard movement control and navigation system as well as a new onboard measuring system.

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