

China completes second space docking

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A flag flies before an upgraded Long March 2F rocket carrying the Shenzhou VIII spacecraft at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in Jiuquan, northwest China's Gansu province in October 2011. China completed its second space docking on Monday, state media reported, as it moves closer towards fulfilling its ambition to set up a manned space station.

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The move comes 12 days after the Asian nation successfully completed its first ever "kiss" in space, when the [Shenzhou](#) VIII spacecraft joined onto the Tiangong-1 experimental module 343 kilometres (213 miles) above the Earth.

The two unmanned vehicles had been travelling together since the

successful manoeuvre on November 3, and on Monday, Shenzhou VIII disengaged from Tiangong-1 for half an hour before re-docking with the module, the state [Xinhua news agency](#) said.

The Shenzhou vehicle, whose name translates as "divine vessel", is a modified version of the capsules that took the first [Chinese astronauts](#) into space as part of the rising power's ambitious exploration programme.

China aims to complete construction of a space station by 2020, a goal that requires it to perfect docking technology -- a delicate manoeuvre that the Russians and Americans successfully completed in the 1960s.

The technique is hard to master because the two vessels, placed in the same orbit and revolving around the Earth at thousands of kilometres per hour, must come together very gently to avoid destroying each other.

Shenzhou VIII took off on November 1 from the Jiuquan base in the northwestern province of Gansu, from where Tiangong-1 -- or "Heavenly Palace" -- also launched on September 29.

It is set to return to Earth on Thursday, Wu Ping, spokeswoman for China's manned space programme, told reporters earlier.

China sees its space programme as a symbol of its global stature, growing technical expertise, and the Communist Party's success in turning around the fortunes of the once poverty-stricken nation.

If the current mission is a success, China will launch two more spacecraft next year to dock with Tiangong-1 -- the Shenzhou IX and Shenzhou X -- at least one of which will be manned.

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