Work on China's mission to Mars 'well underway'

September 20 2017

A Long March-5 rocket blasts off from Wenchang in November 2016

China's programme to launch a mission to Mars in 2020 is "well underway", its top planner said Wednesday as the country moves forward with its ambitious space programme.

The probe will carry 13 types of payload including six rovers, the

official Xinhua news agency said.

"The Mars exploration programme is well underway," it cited the mission's chief architect Zhang Rongqiao as saying.

"The payloads will be used to collect data on the environment, morphology, surface structure and atmosphere of Mars."

Zhang was speaking at the Beijing International Forum on Lunar and Deep-space Exploration, which began Wednesday.

The Long March-5 carrier rocket will blast off from the Wenchang Space Launch Centre in the tropical island province of Hainan, Xinhua said.

Once the probe is in orbit around Mars after a seven-month journey, a lander will separate from it and touch down in the red planet's northern hemisphere.

The lander will then deploy rovers to explore the surface.

Beijing sees its multi-billion-dollar space programme as a symbol of its rise and of the Communist Party's success in turning around the fortunes of the once poverty-stricken nation.

In July it successfully launched the Long March-4B, its first X-ray space telescope to study black holes, pulsars and gamma-ray bursts.

And in April the country's first cargo spacecraft completed its docking with an orbiting space lab—a key development in China's goal of having its own crewed space station by 2022.

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Citation: Work on China's mission to Mars 'well underway' (2017, September 20) retrieved 19 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2017-09-china-mission-mars-underway.html

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