

# Maduro says Venezuelan astronauts could go to Moon in Chinese spaceship

September 14 2023

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Maduro arrived in Beijing on Tuesday after a tour of Shanghai and other Chinese cities.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said his country could send its first astronauts to the Moon in a Chinese spacecraft, hailing on Thursday

a scientific cooperation agreement he reached with President Xi Jinping.

Maduro, whose oil-rich country is in profound economic crisis, has been in China since last week. In Beijing on Wednesday, he met with Xi, with the pair agreeing to "upgrade" ties between their governments.

Maduro announced during his meeting with Xi on Wednesday that the two countries had agreed to train young Venezuelan astronauts in China, with plans to eventually send them to the Moon.

A special task team "on scientific, technological, industrial and aerospace cooperation will sooner rather than later (send) the first Venezuelan man and woman to the moon in a Chinese spacecraft", Maduro said.

"Very soon, Venezuelan youth will come here to prepare as astronauts in Chinese schools," he said.

China is pursuing plans to send a crewed mission to the Moon by 2030 and build a base there.

The world's second-largest economy has invested billions of dollars in its military-run space program in a push to catch up with the United States and Russia.

China maintains close relations with the internationally isolated Maduro government and is one of Venezuela's main creditors.

The Latin American country's GDP fell 80 percent in a decade due to the effect of its economic crisis, with citizens struggling to access basic necessities and millions having fled the country.

## **'Airtight partnership'**

In a video posted Thursday on social media, Maduro said, "Where we're heading is for the Moon, to a splendid era for China and Venezuela."

He said the two countries "have declared the relationship as an airtight and strategic partnership for all times".

And speaking at a press conference Thursday as he wrapped up the trip, Maduro said China and Venezuela had entered "a splendid stage in economic, cultural, educational, civilisational, scientific achievements".

"We had never achieved a document of the depth, strategic importance and consensus of this document," Maduro said.

He also showed off two gifts from Xi, including a Huawei folding mobile phone.

"It is the most secure phone, impossible to break into," he said.

The two sides said in an agreement signed on Wednesday they "are close friends of mutual trust, good partners of common development, and dear partners of strategic collaboration".

It also reiterated Venezuela's interest in joining the BRICS group of major emerging economies that held its most recent summit in August in Johannesburg.

The original grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa announced at that summit its admission of six new countries, including Argentina.

Venezuela "can contribute significant strengths to the group's energy agenda, as a reliable supplier and the country with the largest proven oil reserves and the fourth-largest natural gas reserve worldwide",

Wednesday's agreement said.

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Citation: Maduro says Venezuelan astronauts could go to Moon in Chinese spaceship (2023, September 14) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-09-maduro-venezuelan-moon.html>

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