

China to send three astronauts to Tiangong space station, part of its ambitious program

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Chinese astronauts for the upcoming Shenzhou-18 mission Ye Guangfu, center, Li Guangsu, left, and Li Cong attend a meeting with the press at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China, Wednesday, April 24, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

China's space agency is making final preparations to send a new crew to

its space station on Thursday as part of its ambitious program that aims to put people on the moon by 2030.

The three-member crew of the Shenzhou-18 spacecraft will relieve the current team who have been manning China's Tiangong space station since last October.

China built its own space station after being excluded from the International Space Station, largely due to the United States' concerns over the People's Liberation Army's—the Chinese Communist Party's military arm's—involvement in the program. This year, the station is slated for two cargo spacecraft missions and two manned spaceflight missions.

In a press conference on Wednesday, the China Manned Space Agency (CMSA) introduced the three astronauts: Commander Ye Guangfu, 43, a veteran astronaut who was part of the Shenzhou-13 mission in 2021; and astronauts Li Cong, 34, and Li Guangsu, 36, who will go to space for the first time.

The Shenzhou-18 crew will spend about six months on the space station. They will conduct scientific tests, install space debris protection equipment on the space station, carry out payload experiments, and popularize science education, among other things, according to Lin Xiqiang, deputy director of the CMSA.



Chinese astronauts for the upcoming Shenzhou-18 mission Ye Guangfu, center, Li Guangsu, left, and Li Cong attend a meeting with the press at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China, Wednesday, April 24, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

Lin also said China was working toward eventually offering access to its space station to foreign astronauts and space tourists.

"We will accelerate the research and promotion of the participation of foreign astronauts and space tourists in flights with China's space station," he said. "We definitely expect to see astronauts of different identities on China's space station."

The crew is set for lift-off at 1259 GMT from the Jiuquan Satellite

Launch Center on the edge of the Gobi Desert in the country's northwest.

China conducted its first manned space mission in 2003, becoming the third country after the former Soviet Union and the U.S. to put a person into space using its own resources.

The U.S. space program is believed to still hold a significant edge over China's due to its spending, supply chains and capabilities. However, China has broken out in some areas, bringing samples back from the lunar surface for the first time in decades and landing a rover on the less explored far side of the moon.



Chinese astronauts for the upcoming Shenzhou-18 mission, from left, Li Guangsu, Ye Guangfu and Li Cong wave as they arrive for a meeting with the

press at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China, Wednesday, April 24, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong



Chinese astronauts for the upcoming Shenzhou-18 mission, from left, Li Guangsu, Ye Guangfu and Li Cong wave as they arrive for a meeting with the press at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China, Wednesday, April 24, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

The U.S.—the only country to have previously put astronauts on the moon—aims to put a crew back on the lunar surface by the end of 2025 as part of a renewed commitment to crewed missions, aided by private sector players such as SpaceX and Blue Origin.

Only four countries, the U.S., Russia, China and India, have [landed spacecraft on the moon](#).

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