Russian spacecraft delivers 3 to orbiting station

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In this photo taken Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2011 photo, the Soyuz-FG rocket booster with Soyuz TMA-03M space ship carrying a new crew to the International Space Station, blasts off from the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome, Kazakhstan. The Russian rocket carries U.S. astronaut Donald Pettit, Russian cosmonaut Oleg Kononenko and Netherlands' astronaut Andre Kuipers. (AP Photo)

A Soyuz spacecraft safely delivered a Russian, an American and a Dutchman to the International Space Station on Friday, restoring the permanent crew to six members for the first time since September.

But just as concerns over the reliability of the Soyuz have eased, a different version of the Soyuz rocket failed Friday during an unmanned launch. It was the latest in a string of spectacular launch failures that have raised questions about the state of Russia's space industry.

The craft carrying mission commander Oleg Kononenko, NASA's Don Pettit and European Space Agency astronaut Andre Kuipers had traveled through space for two days after blasting off from Baikonur, the Russian-operated cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. The ship docked at the orbiting station at 5:19 p.m. (1319GMT) Friday.

About two and half hours later, the three new crew members floated through an opened hatch to join NASA's Dan Burbank and Russians Anton Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin, who had arrived on the station in November.

"I can't think of a prettier picture than seeing all six back on board the space station," NASA's William Gerstenmaier told the assembled crew during a video linkup with Russian Mission Control outside Moscow.

Families of crew members, who had joined space officials to watch the docking, also sent their greetings, with Kuipers' young child singing him a song in Dutch.

The six crew members will work together on the International Space Station until mid-March.

The failed launch of an unmanned Progress cargo ship in August had raised doubts about future missions to the station, because the Soyuz rocket that crashed used the same upper stage as the booster rockets carrying Soyuz ships to orbit.

The next manned launch was delayed until Russian space officials could

determine the cause of the Progress failure and it went off without a hitch in November. The crew on that mission overlapped for eight days with the three crew members remaining on the station, who then returned to Earth later that month.

However, on Friday, a newer version of the Soyuz failed to put a Meridian communications satellite into orbit when launched from Russia's Plesetsk cosmodrome. Space agency head Vladimir Popovkin said the cause was engine failure.

"What happened today was a highly unpleasant situation," Popovkin was quoted by state news agencies as saying. "It confirms that the (aerospace) industry is in crisis and its weakest link is engine building."

The failures Friday and during the Progress launch in August both took place during the third stage. The Soyuz-2.1b that crashed Friday, however, has a different third-stage engine, the ITAR-Tass news agency said.

Friday's failed launch was the sixth in the past year.

Last December, Russia lost three navigation satellites when a rocket carrying them failed to reach orbit. A military satellite was lost in February, and the launch of the Express-AM4, described by officials as Russia's most powerful telecommunications satellite, went awry in August.

In November, Russia sent up its ambitious Phobos-Ground unmanned probe, which was to go to the Phobos moon of Mars, take soil samples and return them to Earth. But engineers lost contact with the ship and were unable to propel it out of Earth orbit and toward Mars. The craft is now expected to fall to Earth in mid-January.