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Carrier rocket preparing for its debut flight

Ship-based launch will increase carrying capacity, reduce costs, scientist notes

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Smart Dragon 3, a new model of solid-propellant carrier rocket, is scheduled to make its debut flight in September, according to a senior rocket scientist.

Engineers at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology, the country's major rocket maker, are building the first Smart Dragon 3, which will be launched for the model's first mission, said Jiang Jie, a senior rocket scientist at the academy and a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The first flight will be launched from a platform at sea, which means Smart Dragon 3 will become the second Chinese rocket capable of liftoff both on the ground and at sea, she said.

China has so far carried out two ship-based rocket launches using its Long March 11 solid-propellant rocket.

Compared with conventional land-based launches, a sea mission has a lower risk of causing trouble for densely populated areas along the rocket's trajectory, Jiang said.

The method also allows launches to be made near the equator, which increases the rocket's carrying capacity, lowers launch costs and extends the life span of some satellites.

"We have arranged two to three launch missions by Smart Dragon 3 within this year. We estimate that at least five launches of this rocket will be made each year starting in

2023, as the demand will keep increasing," the scientist said.

Jiang made the remarks during the fifth session of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which recently ended in Beijing. She is a member of the CPPCC National Committee, the nation's top political advisory body.

With a diameter of 2.64 meters and a liftoff weight of 140 metric tons, the rocket will become the largest and strongest in China's solid-propellant rocket fleet.

It will be capable of putting multiple satellites with a combined weight of 1.5 tons into a sun-synchronous orbit at an altitude of 500 kilometers.

The second in the Smart Dragon family to enter service, Smart Dragon 3 will be suitable to clients who wish to launch large quantities of satellites within a short period of time to establish space-based commercial networks as soon as possible, according to Long Wei, deputy project manager for the rocket.

Smart Dragon 1, the first model in the family, conducted its debut flight in August 2019 from northwestern China's Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center.

It is 19.5 meters tall, has a diameter of 1.2 meters and weighs 23.1 tons.

Speaking about Long March 11's launch schedule for this year, Jiang said four to five flights are expected, to transport small satellites into space.