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Rocket ready for record-setting role

Modified Long March 8 set to deploy 22 satellites in impending first mission

By ZHAO LEI

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A modified version of China's Long March 8 carrier rocket is scheduled to make its debut flight in the coming weeks to transport 22 satellites into orbit, a designer said.

Chen Xiaofei, from the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology in Beijing, said on Wednesday that if the launch mission succeeds, it will set a record for the most spacecraft launched by a single Chinese rocket.

Currently, the domestic record for the most satellites launched by a single rocket is held by the first flight of the Long March 6 model in September 2015, which deployed 20 satellites. The world record is held by SpaceX's Falcon 9, which lifted 143 satellites in January last year.

"The difference between the modified variant and the original Long March 8 is that the new model doesn't have side boosters," Chen said, noting that all of the 22 satellites to be launched are for commercial use.

Like the original model, the variant is 50.3 meters long. It will be propelled by four engines — two on the first stage and two on the second — and will have a liftoff weight of 198 metric tons, Chen said.

Long March 8's original model performed its debut mission in December 2020 from a coastal launchpad at the Wenchang Space Launch Center in southern China's Hainan province.

The rocket reached a sun-synchronous orbit at an altitude of 512 kilometers and then deployed the New Technology Demonstrator 7 experimental satellite and four small private satellites.

A new production complex for

Long March 8 series rockets is being built outside the Wenchang launch center with a designed annual manufacturing capacity of 25 rockets. A new launch tower specifically designed for the Long March 8 family is also being built at the center, Chen said.

Rockets in the Long March 8 family are capable of transporting various types of spacecraft to multiple types of orbit, but their main task is to place satellites in sun-synchronous orbits to meet the surging demand for launch services from commercial satellite companies at home and abroad, he said.

Mission planners have estimated

the market will demand at least 18 Long March 8 rockets during the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) period, Chen noted.

China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp, the nation's leading space contractor and parent of Chen's academy, plans to carry out more than 50 rocket launches this year to transport over 140 spacecraft into orbit. That means the total number of launches in China this year will surpass 60, given that another State-owned contractor — China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp — and the country's private space enterprises will also conduct launches using their own rockets.