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Latest Long March rocket makes debut

Carrier rocket places four satellites in orbit after launch from Taiyuan center

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The Long March 6C, the latest member of China's Long March carrier rocket family, conducted its debut flight on Tuesday morning, sending four small satellites into space.

The 43-meter-tall rocket blasted off at 11:21 am from the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center in a mountainous part of Shanxi province and placed four satellites — a radar satellite, an optical remote-sensing satellite, and two experimental satellites — into their preset orbits, according to the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology, the developer of the rocket model and a subsidiary of State-owned conglomerate China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp.

The two-stage launch vehicle has a diameter of 3.35 meters and is propelled by three engines consuming liquid oxygen and kerosene.

With an overall liftoff weight of 215 metric tons, the model is capable of transporting spacecraft with a combined weight of about 2.4 tons to a typical sun-synchronous orbit with an altitude of 500 kilometers, or 4 tons of payload to a low-Earth orbit 300 km above the ground, according to Li Cheng-gang, its chief designer at the Shanghai academy.

A major trait of the rocket, Li said, is that a large proportion of its body



The 43-meter-tall Long March 6C rocket lifts off from the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center in Shanxi province on Tuesday.
ZHENG TAOTAO / FOR CHINA DAILY

and structure is made of lightweight composite materials, which substantially reduce the model's overall weight and give it a bigger carrying capacity.

Research and development of the new rocket started in early 2020, he said, adding that the model will mainly be used to meet demand from commercial space enterprises for the transport of small and mid-

sized satellites to sun-synchronous orbits.

"The Long March 6C has been designed based on its two predecessors, the Long March 6 and Long March 6A, and features a good operational reliability, a comparatively low launch cost, and can fit with different types of satellites and various orbits," Li said. "Moreover, it only needs a short time for prelaunch preparation work."

China has developed and launched more than 20 types of Long March-series rockets. The Long March family is the pillar of the country's space programs and has fulfilled 520 launch missions.

Following its successful maiden launch, the Long March 6C has become the 17th member of the Long March fleet in active service.

After the Long March 6C, designers and engineers at the Shanghai academy plan to carry out the maiden flight of another rocket model, the Long March 12, this year.

Assembly and testing of the first Long March 12 rocket is underway at the academy. The maiden flight is scheduled to take place in the coming months from the Hainan International Commercial Aerospace Launch Center in Wenchang, Hainan province, which is now under construction.

Once in service, the Long March 12 will become the first Chinese rocket with a diameter of 3.8 meters — wider than the 3.35-meter diameter of most Chinese rockets — and will have two stages. It will be more than 60 meters tall, according to designers.