

CHINA LAUNCHES AMBITIOUS MARS MISSION

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Space race: People watching a rocket, carrying an orbiter, lander and rover, on a mission to Mars from Hainan. AFPSTR

China launched its most ambitious Mars mission yet on Thursday in a bold attempt to join the U.S. in successfully landing a spacecraft on the red planet.

A Long March-5 carrier rocket took off under clear skies around 12-40 p.m. from Hainan Island, south of China's mainland. Hundreds of space enthusiasts cried out excitedly on a beach across the bay from the launch site.

"This is a kind of hope, a kind of strength," said Li Dapeng, co-founder of the China branch of the Mars Society, an international enthusiast group.

China's space agency said that the rocket carried the probe for 36 minutes before successfully placing it on the looping path that will take it beyond Earth's orbit and eventually into Mars' more distant orbit around the sun.

China's tandem spacecraft — with both an orbiter and a rover — will take seven months to reach Mars, like the others. If all goes well, Tianwen-1, or "quest for heavenly truth," will look for underground water, if it's present, as well as evidence of possible ancient life.

It marked the second flight to Mars this week, after a UAE orbiter blasted off on a rocket from Japan on Monday. And the U.S. is aiming to launch Perseverance, its most sophisticated Mars rover ever, from Cape Canaveral, Florida, next week.

Solo attempt

This isn't China's first attempt at Mars. In 2011, a Chinese orbiter accompanying a Russian mission was lost when the spacecraft failed to get out of Earth's orbit after launching from Kazakhstan, eventually burning up in the atmosphere.

This time, China is going at it alone. It also is fast-tracking, launching an orbiter and rover on the same mission instead of stringing them out.

Landing on Mars is notoriously difficult. Only the U.S. has successfully landed a spacecraft on Martian soil, doing it eight times since 1976.

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