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# Shenzhou-23: China Launches Crewed Mission with First Hong Kong Astronaut

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# Shenzhou-23: China Launches Crewed Mission with First Hong Kong Astronaut

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## WHY IN NEWS:

China launched **Shenzhou-23** atop a **Long March 2-F** rocket from the **Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre** on **May 24, 2026**. The mission carries a three-member crew to the **Tiangong Space Station** and marks two historic firsts — **Hong Kong’s first astronaut (Lai Ka-ying)** in orbit, and **China’s first year-long crewed spaceflight**.

## MISSION AT A GLANCE

DETAIL	PARTICULARS
Launch date & time	May 24, 2026, 11:08 a.m. EDT
Launch vehicle	Long March 2-F (rated for crewed flight)
Launch site	Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre, Inner Mongolia (Gobi Desert)
Destination	Tiangong Space Station (LEO, ~340–450 km)
Crew size	3
Mission duration	First-ever ~1-year stay for one crew member

## THE CREW

- **Commander — Zhu Yangzhu:** Second spaceflight; previously flew on **Shenzhou-16 (2023)**.
- **Pilot — Zhang Zhiyuan:** Rookie flight.
- **Payload Specialist — Lai Ka-ying:** **First astronaut from Hong Kong**, a former Hong Kong Police officer selected in China’s **2024 astronaut batch**.

One member of the crew will remain in orbit for approximately one year — the longest single-stay assignment in China’s crewed programme so far.

## THE TIANGONG SPACE STATION

Tiangong (天宫 — “Heavenly Palace”) is China’s modular space station in Low Earth Orbit.

### Modules

MODULE	ROLE	LAUNCH
Tianhe (核心舱)	Core / habitation	April 29, 2021
Wentian	Laboratory	July 24, 2022
Mengtian	Laboratory	October 31, 2022

### Key Characteristics

- **Crew complement:** Typically 3, expanded to 6 during handover periods.
- **Operational since:** 2022; designed lifespan **10+ years**.
- **Orbital inclination:** **41.5°** — lower than the ISS at 51.6°.
- **Mass:** Around **100 tonnes** — roughly a quarter of the **ISS (~420 tonnes)**.

## OUTGOING CREW — SHENZHOU-21

The returning crew comprises **Zhang Lu, Wu Fei, and Zhang Hongzhang**, who completed an extended stay of roughly seven months aboard Tiangong before handover.

## CHINA’S CREWED SPACEFLIGHT PROGRAMME — A SHORT HISTORY

MILESTONE	DETAIL
First Chinese in space	<b>Yang Liwei</b> , Shenzhou-5, <b>October 15, 2003</b> — China becomes the <b>3rd nation</b> after USSR/Russia and USA to send a human to space
First Chinese spacewalk	Zhai Zhigang, Shenzhou-7, <b>2008</b>
First Chinese woman in space	Liu Yang, Shenzhou-9, <b>2012</b>
First 6-month crewed mission	Shenzhou-13, <b>2021</b>
First Hong Kong astronaut & first 1-year stay	<b>Shenzhou-23, 2026</b>

## CHINA'S DEEP-SPACE AMBITIONS

- **Chang'e lunar series: Chang'e-6 (May 2024)** achieved the **first-ever sample return from the lunar far side**.
- **Tianwen-1 Mars probe:** Orbiter + lander + rover, **2021**.
- **International Lunar Research Station (ILRS):** Joint with Russia; targeted for the **2030s**.
- **Crewed lunar mission:** Targeted by **2030**.

## ISS CONTEXT — WHY TIANGONG'S ROLE WILL GROW

- The **International Space Station (ISS)** has been continuously crewed since 2000, with partners **USA, Russia, ESA, JAXA, and Canada**.
- The ISS is scheduled for **de-orbit by 2030** — Russia signalled withdrawal post-2024, and NASA has begun deorbit planning.
- **Post-2030:** Tiangong is likely to be the **sole continuously crewed LEO station** unless US commercial successors — Axiom Station, Orbital Reef — reach service in time.

## INDIA'S SPACE PROGRAMME — THE COMPARISON

PROGRAMME / MILESTONE	TARGET / YEAR
<b>Gaganyaan</b> — India's first crewed mission (3 crew, 3-day LEO)	2027
<b>Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS)</b> — India's planned space station	2035
<b>Crewed lunar mission</b>	2040
First Indian in space — <b>Rakesh Sharma</b>	Soyuz T-11, April 2–11, <b>1984</b>
Second Indian in space — <b>Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla</b>	<b>Axiom-4, 2025</b> — first Indian on ISS

## STRATEGIC DIMENSION

- With the ISS heading for de-orbit, **Tiangong becomes a significant soft-power instrument** for Beijing — hosting foreign experiments, training partner astronauts, and projecting scientific prestige.
- **Year-long crewed flight data** is critical groundwork for deep-space and lunar surface missions.
- India must accelerate **Gaganyaan and BAS** if it is to remain in the front rank of space powers.

- The China–Russia **ILRS** is positioning itself as the principal challenger to the US-led **Artemis Accords**. **India joined the Artemis Accords in June 2023**, formally placing itself within the US-led lunar framework.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

**GS Paper 3:** Science & Technology — space programmes, indigenous capacity, comparative analysis of China–India–US trajectories, dual-use technologies.

**GS Paper 2:** International Relations — technology diplomacy, multilateral lunar frameworks (ILRS vs Artemis Accords), strategic implications of China’s deep-space rise for India.

## FACTS CORNER

Shenzhou-23 launched: May 24, 2026 from Jiuquan SLC

Rocket: Long March 2-F

Destination: Tiangong Space Station

First Hong Kong astronaut: Lai Ka-ying

China’s first ~1-year crewed mission

Tiangong modules: Tianhe (April 2021), Wentian (July 2022), Mengtian (October 2022)

First Chinese in space: Yang Liwei, Shenzhou-5, October 15, 2003

Chang’e-6 (May 2024): First lunar far-side sample return

ISS scheduled de-orbit: 2030

India’s Gaganyaan target: 2027

India’s BAS target: 2035; manned lunar mission 2040

First Indian in space: Rakesh Sharma (1984, Soyuz T-11)

India joined Artemis Accords: June 2023

Sources: [CMS](#), [ISRO](#), [NASA](#)

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