

Soyuz Bound for Space Station

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A Soyuz spacecraft carrying a Russian, an American and a Dutchman to the International Space Station blasted off flawlessly from Russia's launch facility in Kazakhstan on Wednesday.

Mission commander Oleg Kononenko and his colleagues, American Don Pettit and European Space Agency astronaut Andre Kuipers, are to dock with the space station Friday.

The blastoff from the snowy launchpad in Baikonur took place without a hitch and the spacecraft reached Earth orbit about nine minutes later. Video from inside the craft showed the three crew members gripping each others' hands in celebration as the final stage of the booster rocket separated.

The three aboard the Russian spacecraft will join three others already on the ISS, NASA's Dan Burbank and Russians Anton Shkaplerov and Anatoly Ivanishin. The six are to work together on the station until March.

The launch came amid a period of trouble for Russia's space program, which provides the only way for crew to reach the space station since the United States retired its space shuttle

program in July.

The launch of an unmanned supply ship for the space station failed in August and the ship crashed in a Siberian forest. The Soyuz rocket carrying that craft was the same type used to send up Russian manned spacecraft, and the crash prompted officials to postpone the next manned launch while the rockets were examined for flaws. The delayed mission eventually took place on Nov. 14.

Just five days before that launch, Russia sent up its ambitious Fobos-Grunt unmanned probe, which was to go to the Martian moon Phobos, take soil samples and return them to Earth. But engineers lost contact with the ship and were unable to propel it out of Earth orbit and toward Mars. The craft is now expected to fall to Earth in mid-January.

Last December, Russia lost three navigation satellites when a rocket carrying them failed to reach orbit. A military satellite was lost in February, and the launch of the Express-AM4, described by officials as Russia's most powerful telecommunications satellite, went awry in August.

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