

## China set for leap into new territory

*Mure Dickie*

Forty years after the era of Soyuz and Apollo, when the US and Russia vied for the technological edge to conquer space, the launch pad is again the site of a struggle but this time it is between the world's fastest growing countries.

Both publicly deny that they are engaged in a space race but China and India are sending up rockets within a few weeks of each other to push their claims to the final frontier.

China's astronauts will attempt a space walk this week. India, meanwhile, plans to map the entire surface of the moon next month. Both countries have ambitious plans for manned and unmanned missions in the years to come. They are not alone; Japan, too, has a space programme.

If all goes as planned, a Chinese astronaut will this week burnish his nation's credentials as a space-faring power by opening the hatch of an orbiting Shenzhou spacecraft and stepping out into the void.

The pioneering space walk will be the central moment of China's third manned flight into orbit and an important step forward in a national space programme seen as both a strategic imperative and a patriotic rallying point. "On this Shenzhou-7 mission, we have the confidence, determination and ability to have a Chinese person step out into space for the first time," astronaut Jing Haipeng said in a televised press conference yesterday at a secluded desert space base in China's northern Gansu province.

Mr Jing and two comrade astronauts are scheduled to blast off this evening for the near-three day mission.

This is the most ambitious effort yet for the manned space programme, which is run by the military but involves more than 100,000 people from more than 3,000 different institutions. It highlights China's success in developing both highly reliable and powerful launch vehicles and the systems needed to keep astronauts alive in space. For many in China and around the world, the programme has become a potent symbol of the nation's wider economic success and technological clout, a view strongly pushed by Beijing's official media.

"This series of soaring flights by China's astronauts are a symbol of its loftiness as a nation and a manifestation of its status as a great power," the Xinhua state news agency said.

The space walk is seen as a step towards missions that would involve docking two spacecraft in orbit and, eventually, work on a space station. Nor are China's extraterrestrial achievements restricted to near-Earth.

Last year, an automated spacecraft made it into lunar orbit, the first step in a moon exploration programme that will include a landing, and later the return of a lander to earth with rock samples. While officials are coy about possible timing, they do not conceal their ambition to achieve a manned moon mission.

Such ambitions can only fuel the concerns of those in the US and elsewhere who are already worried about China's growing power. Beijing's demonstration that it could shoot down low-orbit satellites last year was seen by some in Washington as the first shot in a new space arms race, though Chinese officials dismiss such suggestions as groundless and say they are keen to take part in peaceful space co-operation.

"So far, China's manned space programme hasn't carried out a single military task," said Cui Jijun, director of Gansu launch centre.

Indeed, officials are keen to stress that there still remains a considerable gap between China's space-faring technology and that of Russia and - even more so - the US. In taking a space

walk, Chinese astronauts are boldly going where Russian and Americans went decades before. Reliance on Russian expertise for important components of its programme is also clear in the decidedly retro look of the Shenzhou spacecraft, which is modelled on the Soviet Soyuz, and the decision to take a Russian spacesuit on this week's flight.

Still, there is no doubt that Chinese scientists and technicians are labouring to master all aspects of the technology for space flight, a drive aided immeasurably by a fast-growing and increasingly sophisticated domestic technology sector.

Experts say the Shenzhou spacecraft has been totally re-engineered and this week's mission will also involve a domestically produced spacesuit.

When it comes to Chinese ambition, the sky is most certainly not the limit.

**Fonte: Financial Times, London, September 25 2008, Primeiro Caderno, p. 8.**

A utilização deste artigo é exclusiva para fins educacionais