

SpaceX Unveils Spaceship Able to End U.S. Reliance on Russian Craft

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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SpaceX's new Dragon passenger spacecraft at its unveiling last week.

Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX, on Thursday unveiled an upgraded passenger version of the Dragon cargo ship NASA buys for resupply runs to the International Space Station, or ISS, heralding the end of NASA's reliance on Russian craft.

The U.S. currently pays Russia more than \$60 million per person for round-trip flights on the Russian Soyuz capsule. The price climbs to more than \$70 million in 2016 and to \$76 million in 2017.

Rather than parachuting down into the ocean, the new capsule is outfitted with beefed up motors and landing legs to make precision touchdowns on land, said SpaceX founder and chief executive Elon Musk, a billionaire technology entrepreneur who also runs the Tesla Motors electric car company.

"You will be able to land anywhere on Earth with the accuracy of a helicopter ... That is how a 21st century spaceship should land," Musk said before a jam-packed audience at SpaceX's Hawthorne, California, headquarters.

More than 32,500 people also watched the Dragon unveiling on a live SpaceX webcast.

Lifting the vehicle's hatch, Musk settled into a reclined gold-and-black pilot's seat and pulled down a sleek, rounded glass control panel. The cabin, designed to fly a crew of seven, looked more like a Star Trek movie set than the flight deck of NASA's now-retired space shuttle.

Dragon, which launches on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, is one of three privately owned space taxis vying for NASA development funds and launch contracts.

The U.S. space agency turned over space station cargo runs and crew ferry flights after retiring its fleet of shuttles in 2011. SpaceX already has a \$1.6 billion contract for 12 station resupply missions. Orbital Sciences Corp has a separate, \$1.9 billion contract for eight cargo flights.

NASA also has been working with SpaceX, Boeing and privately owned Sierra Nevada Corporation on a related commercial program to develop spaceships to fly astronauts, with the goal of breaking Russia's monopoly on station crew transports before the end of 2017.

Musk hopes to bring down the cost of flying in space by reusing both the Falcon 9 rockets and Dragon spaceships.

"So long as we continue to throw away rockets and spacecraft we will never have true access to space. It will always be incredibly expensive. If aircraft were thrown away with each flight, nobody would be able to fly ... or very few," Musk said.

NASA is expected to select one or two space taxi designs this summer for final development and test flights.

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