



Written by [James Heiser](#) on May 24, 2012

SpaceX Capsule Brings Supplies to Space Station

Hopes for new private initiatives in manned space flight are reaching new heights following [SpaceX's](#) successful launch of its [Dragon](#) capsule into low Earth orbit. The launch of the Dragon on May 22 was the beginning of SpaceX's first mission to the International Space Station (ISS), fulfilling a job for NASA that the space agency no longer has the capacity to conduct on its own: reach the space station it helped to build.



Following the launch, the palpable exuberance of the company's CEO — Paypal-founder Elon Musk — filled the company's official press release:

At a press conference held after the launch, SpaceX CEO and Chief Designer Elon Musk began, "I would like to start off by saying what a tremendous honor it has been to work with NASA. And to acknowledge the fact that we could not have started SpaceX, nor could we have reached this point without the help of NASA.... It's really been an honor to work with such great people."

The vehicle's first stage performed nominally before separating from the second stage. The second stage successfully delivered the Dragon spacecraft into its intended orbit. This marks the third consecutive successful Falcon 9 launch and the fifth straight launch success for SpaceX. "We obviously have to go through a number of steps to berth with the Space Station, but everything is looking really good and I think I would count today as a success no matter what happens with the rest of the mission," Musk said.

Since the [final flight of NASA's space shuttle](#) last year, the American space agency has lacked a means for sending astronauts and supplies to the ISS that did not involve relying on the Russia Soyuz capsules. The decision by the Obama administration to proceed with the cancellation of the shuttle prior to an alternative spacecraft becoming available was consistent with [a policy that diminishes NASA's involvement](#) in developing its own launch capacity, while aiming at expanding private industry's development of alternatives.

In the aftermath of the final shuttle flight and the new NASA agenda, private space ventures have found a new incentive to press forward with their own programs: The concern that if they do not create new spacecraft to carry Americans into orbit, the only alternatives will be to either rely on the space programs of other nations or abandon human space flight altogether. [As Reuters reported on May 24:](#)

With the retirement of the space shuttles last year, the United States is dependent on station partners Europe, [Japan](#) and especially Russia to reach the orbiting laboratory, which flies about 240 miles (390 km) above Earth.

Rather than building a government-owned and operated replacement for the shuttle, the Obama administration is supporting private industry efforts to develop cargo ships and space taxis so NASA can buy flight services instead, a far cheaper alternative.

If SpaceX's Dragon continues to operate as planned, the company will be cleared to begin working



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off its 12-flight, \$1.6 billion NASA contract to fly cargo to and from the station. A second freighter owned by Orbital Sciences Corp is expected to debut later this year.

NASA is incubating similar partnerships to develop passenger spaceships, which would break the U.S. reliance on [Russia](#) for crew flight services that cost about \$400 million a year.

SpaceX's Dragon capsule has thus far performed according to expectations. Currently, the crew of the ISS are scheduled to capture the unmanned capsule on Friday. (A test run on Thursday went according to expectations.) The capsule's arrival is a most welcome development for astronauts aboard the ISS, since it carries a cargo of 1,200 pounds of food, water, clothing, and various other supplies.

Photo of Dragon capsule: AP Images



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