

CNSA and CNES embark on SVOM astrophysics mission

CNES President Jean-Yves Le Gall and Xu Dazhe, Administrator of the China National Space Administration (CNSA), signed an agreement Saturday 2 August in Beijing on the SVOM astrophysics mission. The agreement is the first concrete result of the accord signed on 26 March during President François Hollande's state visit to the People's Republic of China to establish closer cooperative ties between France and China in oceanography and astrophysics.

SVOM (Space-based multiband astronomical Variable Objects Monitor) is an astronomy mission that aims chiefly to observe and characterize gamma-ray bursts, the highest-energy phenomena in the Universe. It will carry four instruments: a Microchannel X-ray Telescope (MXT), a wide-field X-ray and gamma-ray camera (ECLAIRs), a Gamma Ray Monitor (GRM) and a Visible Telescope (VT). Alerts will be transmitted to ground whenever a gamma-ray burst is detected to cue observation by other telescopes.

The agreement signed on Saturday 2 August in Beijing stipulates sharing of responsibilities between CNES and CNSA, and sets a planned launch for SVOM in 2021. CEA, the French atomic energy and alternative energies commission, and CNRS, the French national scientific research centre, will be partnering CNES in development of the French instruments for SVOM.

China will be responsible for the mission, satellite and bus, and will share responsibility with France for the instruments and ground segment. CNES will oversee the French contribution, consisting of the MXT and ECLAIRs instruments, for which the Toulouse Space Centre (CST) will be prime contractor, and the French elements of the ground segment (MXT and ECLAIRs control centre, data processing centre and alerting antenna network).

After the signature, Jean-Yves Le Gall stated: "This agreement points to a key phase in the cooperation between CNES and CNSA. France is very keen to work with China in space and the start of the SVOM mission reasserts our two nations' desire to establish close collaborative ties. It paves the way for new joint projects in the future, pursued either by CNES or through the European Space Agency (ESA), to which France is the main contributor."

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