

Vikram-1, India's first-ever privately developed orbital rocket, gears up for launch

The Hindu Bureau

BENGALURU

India's first privately developed orbital-class rocket is all set for its maiden launch.

On Thursday, private space launch company Skyroot Aerospace, based in Hyderabad, announced that the launch window for Vikram-1's first test flight, named Mission Aagaman, is between July 12 and August 4.

It said that Test Flight-1 is targeted for no earlier than July 12, subject to the completion of assembly and testing operations at the launch site at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in



Vikram-1 sits on a launch pad at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota.

Sriharikota, as well as weather, safety and range clearance. The launch window extends till August 4.

The company said that Mission Aagaman, meaning 'the arrival', marks its

second mission following the successful suborbital flight of Vikram-S, the first private rocket to reach space from Indian soil, on November 18, 2022.

It said that this would be a partially commercial flight, with the company planning to commence full commercial flights after one or two successful demonstrations to orbit.

All stages of the Skyroot's Vikram-1 have been successfully integrated and stacked at the launch pad.

The mission will gather critical data across propulsion, stage separation, guidance, navigation, control and overall vehicle performance.

Free Indo-Pacific a priority for India and Japan: Modi

During first visit to India as PM, Takaichi says both countries are 'perfectly aligned' and stresses the need for 'strategic cooperation'; both sides sealed 129 MoUs on technology, investment and AI

Saurabh Trivedi
Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

A “free and rules-based Indo-Pacific” is a common priority for India and Japan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday while welcoming his Japanese counterpart, Sanae Takaichi. Mr. Modi said India and Japan would jointly develop technologies that would help in maintaining maritime security and “regional peace”.

“India and Japan are among the biggest economies of the world. A free, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific is our shared priority. We will jointly pave the way for peace, stability and progress for the entire region,” Mr. Modi said.



Boosting ties: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Japanese counterpart Sanae Takaichi in New Delhi. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

“In the field of defence, India and Japan have done the first agreement for co-development of projects. This agreement on naval radio antenna will open a new chapter of defence technology partnership. Now, we will jointly deve-

lop such technologies that will help in maintaining regional peace, maritime security, and strengthen rules-based order,” Mr. Modi added.

Ms. Takaichi, who arrived in New Delhi on July 1 for her first visit to India as

Prime Minister, renewed her call for an updated free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and emphasised the need for “strategic cooperation”. She said the two countries were “perfectly aligned”.

Mr. Modi and Ms. Takaichi attended an economic session in which Indian and Japanese companies sealed 129 memoranda of understanding on technology, investment, and artificial intelligence.

According to a document shared by the External Affairs Ministry, Japan is on track to invest \$1 trillion across States, including Haryana, Odisha, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and those in the northeastern region.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 14

'A free Indo-Pacific is priority for India, Japan'

Ms. Takaichi highlighted the importance of maritime security as the key to maintaining regional stability in the Indo-Pacific region. "Expansion of maritime security is especially important for regional peace and stability," Ms. Takaichi said, highlighting the harmony between Japan's call for FOIP and the Government of India's emphasis on ocean as a "shared space" that can sustain economic growth and safeguard sovereignty. "In the midst of international affairs in disarray, the establishment of such an inter-complementary cooperative relationship has become ever more important," she stated.

The Japanese Prime Minister said the two sides were "perfectly aligned" to advance common goals like FOIP. She expressed concern about the situation in the Gulf region, where at least 31 Japanese vessels remain stranded near the Strait of Hormuz.

The two sides also announced deepening of bilateral defence cooperation through joint military exercises, particularly naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and expanding Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).

Interacting with the media on Thursday evening, Japanese officials said that bilateral cooperation in defence equipment and technology was progressing through industry agreements. They emphasised that the defence technologies being exported were intended for "defence purposes and not for warfare".

During official talks, they expressed concerns over "China's growing military expenditure and coercive activities" and supported the need to resolve the Taiwan-related issues through dialogue. The Japanese delegation also highlighted concerns about North Korean military activities and called for denuclearisation of North Korea. "Japan seeks dialogue with China while avoiding escalation despite economic restrictions imposed on Japanese companies," they said.

The two sides highlighted the need to collaborate in addressing energy security needs against the backdrop of the disruption in the Persian Gulf region and supported the idea of "strategic stockpiling of crude oil" to serve bilateral requirements. Japan is diversifying energy suppliers in the backdrop of the crisis in West Asia, said Japanese officials.

Navy foils piracy attempt in Gulf of Aden; three vessels still in captivity, IMO warns

INS Trikand intercepts and secures Thoothukudi-bound bulk carrier *Golden Arsenal*; International Maritime Organization says 3 other ships are held by pirates, with a critical situation aboard one of them, which has an Indian crew member; five Indians among crews of two of the three ships

Saurabh Trivedi

M. Kalyanaraman
NEW DELHI/CHENNAI

The Indian Navy successfully responded to a piracy attempt on the merchant vessel *MV Golden Arsenal* in the Gulf of Aden, with stealth frigate *INS Trikand* swiftly intercepting and securing the ship after the attack.

The operation comes even as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) issued an urgent appeal for the release of the crews of three other vessels still held by Somali pirates, warning that the humanitarian situation aboard one of them, which has one Indian crew member, had turned critical. Five Indian nationals are among the crews of two of those three vessels.

The Navy on Thursday informed that the *Golden Arsenal*, a St. Vincent and the Grenadines-flagged bulk carrier, reported an attempted pirate attack on July 1 while transiting from Aden, Yemen, approxi-

mately 300 nautical miles east-northeast of Djibouti. The vessel, en route to Thoothukudi, was carrying 21 crew members – 20 Syrian nationals and one Indian.

The incident was reported through the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), following which *INS Trikand*, then about 80 nautical miles away, altered course to close in on the vessel. As it approached, the frigate launched a helicopter to the area.

Fortified refuge

On establishing communication with the vessel, naval personnel ascertained that the crew had taken shelter in the ship's citadel – a fortified refuge built to withstand forced entry, equipped with independent power, ventilation, satellite communication and supplies – and remained safe throughout the incident, with pirates suspected to be still onboard. *Golden Arsenal* had been stopped roughly 110 nautical miles northeast of So-



Indian Navy personnel with seafarers on board Thoothukudi-bound *MV Golden Arsenal* after an anti-piracy operation. PTI

malia's Boosaaso, with *INS Trikand* maintaining a close watch within 1.5 nautical miles of the vessel through the night.

On Thursday, a team from *INS Trikand* boarded *Golden Arsenal* to sanitise the vessel and assess the situation. After a comprehensive search, no suspicious personnel were found onboard. The crew then safely emerged from the citadel and, along with Indian Navy personnel, began assessing the damage to the vessel. To streng-

then the operation, the Indian Navy also deployed a P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft for aerial surveillance.

The merchant ship had sustained damage to its bridge superstructure and adjoining compartments during the pirate attack.

With the vessel declared secure and the immediate threat neutralised, *INS Trikand* concluded its anti-piracy operation. The *Golden Arsenal* has since resumed its onward voyage. The Navy said it remains commit-

ted to safeguarding merchant shipping, countering piracy and ensuring the safety of all seafarers in the Indian Ocean Region, irrespective of nationality.

Ships held hostage

Meanwhile, the IMO has expressed particular concern over the Palau-flagged tanker *MT Honour 25*, whose 17 crew members – including one Indian national – have now been held for more than two months since the vessel was hijacked on April 24. Citing the latest communication from the ship's Master, the IMO statement said five crew members, including the Master, were now unwell, with food supplies reportedly down to rice alone and the available drinking water unfit to drink.

It also said armed pirates guarding the vessel had recently exchanged fire with a rival pirate group that tried to approach the ship, leaving the crew caught between competing armed factions.

The Master was quoted

appealing to the international community to help secure the crew's release.

The IMO said the crews of two other vessels – *Sward* and *MV Eureka* – also continue to be held under similarly difficult conditions. *MV Eureka's* 12-member crew includes four Indian nationals, while there are no Indians among those held aboard *Sward*, according to officials.

The IMO called for urgent, coordinated international intervention to secure the immediate and unconditional release of all three crews, urging Somalia's federal government, flag states, shipowners, insurers and regional partners to intensify diplomatic and operational efforts.

The *Golden Arsenal* operation is the latest in a series of anti-piracy patrols the Indian Navy has sustained in the Gulf of Aden and the wider Western Indian Ocean amid what the IMO has described as a resurgence of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the region.

Kuki village torched in Manipur's Noney district in pre-dawn attack

The Hindu Bureau

GUWAHATI

Manipur's trail of violence widened after an armed group attacked and torched a Kuki village in Noney district around 5 a.m. on Thursday.

The Kuki Inpi (apex body) of Jiribam, Tamenglong, and Noney districts alleged that suspected members of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) carried out an "unprovoked" pre-dawn attack on Leikot Kuki village, reducing it to ashes.

The NSCN is also known as the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, one of the oldest extremist



Desolate look: The Leikot Kuki village in Manipur lies in shambles after the attack. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

groups in the northeastern region.

The Kuki Inpi said the village volunteers, armed with licensed single-barrel firearms and limited resources, tried to defend

the village but were overwhelmed by the attackers who used automatic rifles and mortar shells.

The incident happened more than 200 km west of the India-Myanmar border,

where armed Naga groups allegedly torched Phaimol Kuki village and Kuki extremists reportedly destroyed Huimin Thana and Kherogram villages in a retaliation. The villages along the international border are in Kamjong district.

Thursday's attack indicated an expansion of the Kuki-Naga conflict zone, which began with Ukhrul district and spread to the adjoining Kamjong and Kangpokpi districts.

Condemning the attack on Leikot Kuki village, the Kuki Inpi questioned the inadequate security arrangements in vulnerable areas of Noney district and demanded immediate government intervention.

Submarine cable project linking India, Malaysia, Singapore unveiled

The Hindu Bureau

HYDERABAD

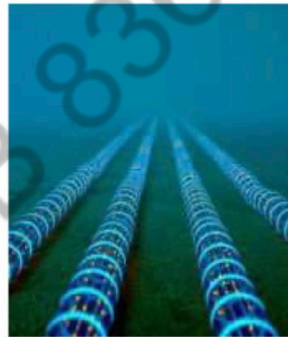
A consortium comprising Microsoft, Singtel, Tata Communications and AI connectivity platform Lightstorm will build a submarine cable system connecting India, Malaysia and Singapore.

“The facility is designed to cater to the rapidly-growing demand from hyperscalers, GPU infrastructure providers and enterprises running AI training and inference workloads across the India-Southeast Asia corridor,” Lightstorm said announcing signing of contracts to launch the

building of the cable system. No details of the proposed investment on the project were shared.

Dual landings

I-2SEA, the cable system, would link India’s east coast, home to the fastest-growing AI and hyperscaler data centre clusters in Hyderabad and Chennai, directly to Singapore, the region’s cloud interconnect and AI hub as well as Malaysia’s emerging data centre corridor in Kuala Lumpur. It would have dual landings in India, with the one at Machilipatnam providing shortest subsea access to Hyderabad and



Picture for representational purpose only.

the other at a new diverse landing location in South Chennai.

“The I-2SEA consortium will operate under a joint build agreement. NEC Corporation has been appoint-

ed as system supplier and ASEAN Cablesip (ACPL) as marine installation partner. The system is now open for capacity commitments,” Lightstorm said.

I-2SEA is targeted to be ready-for-service in Q4 2029 and estimated length of the high-capacity cable is 3,600 km from Singapore to Machilipatnam with onward connectivity to Hyderabad.

“It is expected to deliver the fastest transmission on the Singapore/Malaysia-Hyderabad corridor, which is the most strategically critical city pair for AI workloads in the region,” the company said.

Unprecedented security in place as the first batch of Amarnath pilgrims arrive in Kashmir

Bashaarat Masood
Srinagar, July 2

AMID UNPRECEDENTED security arrangements, this year's first batch of nearly 5,000 Amarnath pilgrims arrived in the Kashmir valley on Thursday.

The pilgrims were welcomed by senior security and civil officials at Qazigund in south Kashmir immediately after they crossed the Navyug tunnel, which connects the Kashmir Valley with the Jammu region.

Early on Thursday morning, Lt Governor Manoj Sinha had flagged off the first batch of pilgrims from Jammu. They reached in Qazigund by around noon. The pilgrims were welcomed at Qazigund by Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police, South Kashmir; DIG Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF); Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), Kulgam; and other senior civil and security officials.

Officials said the first batch comprised 4,822 pilgrims, including 816 women, who will take the journey to the Hima-



Pilgrims of the first batch for the annual Amarnath Yatra undergo security checks as they arrive at the Nunwan Base Camp, in Pahalgam, Anantnag district, Jammu and Kashmir, on Thursday. PTI

layan cave shrine through the twin routes that go through Pahalgam and Baltal.

While 2,510 pilgrims will take the traditional Pahalgam-Chandanwari-Amarnath route, 2,312 pilgrims will take the shorter Sonamarg-Baltal-Amarnath route. From Qazigund, the pilgrims moved towards the twin base camps of Nunwan in Pahalgam and Baltal. On Friday morn-

ing, they will commence the onward journey to the cave shrine.

The traditional Pahalgam route is an arduous trek that takes three days to reach the cave shrine on foot, palkis, or ponies. The Baltal route is a shorter 14-kilometre trek that allows pilgrims to return in a day.

For the second year, the Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB) has decided not to run the heli-

copter service to the cave shrine after the government declared the two routes as "no-fly zones" as a security measure.

This year, an unprecedented security apparatus has been put in place for the Amarnath yatra, which is the biggest annual security exercise in Jammu and Kashmir. The multi-layered security apparatus includes no-fly zones along the twin yatra routes, watch towers to keep vigil and real-time monitoring of vehicular movement.

The J&K Police issued tamper-proof QR code-based identity cards to service providers, including pony service operators, as part of improved security. The identity cards, when scanned, will provide complete information about a service provider.

Security agencies will be monitoring, in real time, the movement of pilgrim convoys through a network of CCTV cameras setup across the twin routes. The government has also issued RFID tags for vehicles, pilgrims and the service providers.

‘Ukrainian state ordered Nord Stream sabotage’

Agence France-Presse

BERLIN

German prosecutors said on Thursday that the Ukrainian state ordered a 2022 bomb attack on the Nord Stream gas pipelines, complicating relations between Kyiv and its key military backer Berlin.

The sabotage, never claimed by any actor, destroyed three of the four Baltic seafloor pipelines of the major energy link from Russia to Germany and released huge amounts of methane into the atmosphere.

The Ukrainian government has always denied ordering the destruction of the pipelines, which had in earlier times allowed Russia to earn billions through gas sales to Germany and beyond.



Gas leak at the Nord Stream 2 pipeline off the Danish Baltic island of Bornholm, south of Dueodde in 2022. AFP

News broke on Wednesday that German prosecutors had now levelled charges against the Ukrainian suspect Serhii Kuznetsov, who is alleged to have led a team of divers in the high-stakes operation.

He was arrested while on holiday in Italy last summer and extradited to Germany in November.

In a statement on Thursday detailing the charges, including the alleged war crime of targeting civilian infrastructure, German prosecutors said that he was “an officer in the Ukrainian army” and that he and other military personnel had acted “on the orders of state authorities in Ukraine”.

Russian attack kills 21 in Kyiv as Ukraine hits Moscow's oil sector

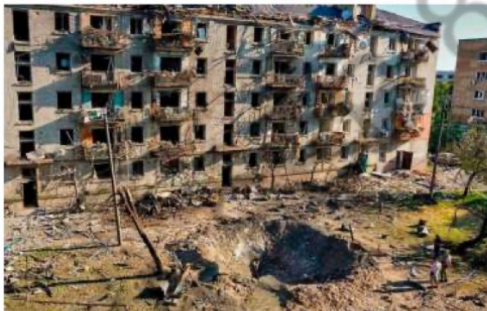
Moscow says strikes were retaliation for Ukrainian attacks on oil facilities, adding that the bombardment was 'exclusively against military or military-linked targets'; Kyiv's long-range strikes have triggered the worst fuel crisis in Crimea since 2014

Associated Press

KYIV

Russia hammered Kyiv in an 11-hour drone and missile attack overnight into Thursday morning, killing at least 21 civilians in the city and injuring more than 90 others in what Moscow said was retaliation for Ukrainian strikes on Russian oil facilities.

Loud explosions shook the Ukrainian capital, where more than 50,000 people sheltered in subway stations after authorities issued air raid warnings, the Kyiv Metro said. Emergency crews dug through the rubble of collapsed and



People look at the site of a Russian missile strike that hit a residential building in Kyiv, Ukraine, on Thursday. AP

charred apartment buildings all day in search of victims.

Russia's Defence Ministry said in a statement that the bombardment was in

response to Ukraine's recent barrage of long-range strikes, which have caused severe fuel shortages and put pressure on President Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine's frequent attacks inside Russia – described by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a 40-day blitz – have especially targeted oil refineries, causing a fuel crisis that has frustrated Russians already feeling the war's economic toll.

More than four years after Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbour, Ukraine's technological advances in drone engineering have in recent months given it an edge, analysts and Western officials say. Its strikes on supply routes behind the front line have robbed the Russian army of momentum on the battlefield and

made its progress slow and costly, they say.

Kyiv's forces have especially targeted supplies to Crimea, triggering the worst fuel crisis on the Black Sea peninsula since it was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014 and delivering a blow to the Kremlin's narrative that Moscow is winning the war.

Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said it was a "night of horror" in the capital, which had a pre-war population of roughly 3 million people.

The bombardment was "exclusively against military or military-linked targets," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Trump's Quad retreat opens door for India, Japan, Australia



GURJIT
SINGH

The Quad was not intended to be solely an American project. The intellectual foundations were laid largely by Japan, particularly through the vision articulated by Shinzo Abe

THERELUCTANCE of the US to convene a Quad summit, the decision in Washington to revert to a Pacific Command from the Indo-Pacific Command, and the Donald Trump administration's desire to establish a possible G2 with China have generated concern across the Indo-Pacific. **These raise questions about the future of the Quad and the broader vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Yet this may be the moment for India, Japan, and Australia to step forward. The Quad was not intended to be solely an American project. The intellectual foundations were laid largely by Japan, particularly through the vision articulated by Shinzo Abe.** India and Australia embraced the idea because it reflected a shared interest in preserving an open, rules-based maritime order, stretching from Africa's eastern coast to the Pacific Ocean.

If US attention fluctuates, the responsibility for sustaining that vision increasingly falls upon the region's leading middle powers. The meetings of PM Modi with Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi yesterday and with Australian PM Anthony Albanese in Australia this month provide an opportunity to show that the Indo-Pacific's future does not depend exclusively on Washington's enthusiasm.

Japan signalled its intention to assume a greater role. Marking 10 years since Shinzo Abe first outlined the FOIP, Takaichi reaffirmed its relevance. Tokyo's updated FOIP focuses on economic infrastructure for the age of AI, resilient supply chains for energy and critical materials, and security cooperation. These are akin to India's own aims. **Japan's proposed FOIP Digital Corridor, which includes submarine cables, Open RAN, satellite communications, and advanced optical networks, provides opportunities for collaboration with India and Australia.** Australia's growing defence cooperation with Japan also shows how regional powers are trying to reduce reliance on any single external power.

Delhi has long indicated that the Quad is not an Asian NATO and has resisted efforts to transform it into a formal alliance. Strategic autonomy remains central to its foreign policy. But it shouldn't be confused with strategic passivity. A robust India-Japan-Australia framework would allow them to collaborate without depending on an alliance system. India need not be involved in the Taiwan crisis. It can play a bigger role in the Indian Ocean.

Beijing's growing naval strength, economic coercion, aggressive territorial claims, and weaponisation of critical supply chains cause anxiety across the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, many ASEAN members remain wary of having to choose between China and the US. This creates a window for India, Japan, and Australia. They are often perceived as partners rather than rivals.

If the Indo-Pacific is to remain free and open, it should be supported by economic integration. Could India apply for the CPTPP? India withdrew from RCEP in 2019 due to concerns about market access and Chinese domination. CPTPP covers Japan, Australia and others, and excludes China. It promotes rules-based trade, investment protection, digital commerce, and supply-chain integration. Strategically, it would place India firmly within the Indo-Pacific economic architecture, reduce dependence on bilateral trade arrangements and augment India's current FTAs. For a larger role in the regional order, India should look beyond security engagements to frameworks that mould trade, investment, technology, and standards.