



Hindustan Times

FIRST VOICE. LAST WORD.

WIN!
GIFTS EVERY DAY

{ AFTER NEAR-MISS IN ORBIT }

India plans to make new satellites to guard existing ones

Bloombergletters@hindustantimes.com

India is developing a plan to improve its ability to protect satellites from attacks, people familiar with the matter said, after a near miss in orbit highlighted risks to national security posed by other spacecraft.

The government wants to develop so-called bodyguard satellites to identify and counter threats to orbiting spacecraft, according to people who requested to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the matter. Satellites also played a significant role during India's conflict with Pakistan in May.

A previously unreported incident highlighted the need for action, the people added, when a satellite from a neighbouring country came dangerously close to one of India's.

The near miss in mid-2024 involved one of Isro's satellites orbiting around 500-600 kilometres above the Earth, the same part of space that's getting increasingly crowded with communications satellites like Elon Musk's Starlink network.

The spacecraft from a neighbouring country, which the people familiar with the matter wouldn't name, came within 1 kilometre of an Isro satellite performing tasks that could have military applications such as mapping and monitoring of objects on the ground, they said.

Although the two satellites didn't collide, such an unusually close approach was possibly a show of strength that could have been a test to demonstrate the other nation's capabilities, the people said. Isro and the Department of Space did not respond to requests for comment.

Satellite-protection project

The satellite-protection project is part of a bigger effort by Narendra Modi's government to develop more security assets in orbit, including a ₹27,000 crore (\$3 billion) plan for about 50 surveillance satellites, the first of which is expected to launch next year.

India has had multiple armed conflicts in the past seven decades with both Pakistan and China — nations that have vastly different capabilities in space.

Pakistan has just eight satellites, compared with over 100 for India, according to [SpaceTrack.org](https://www.space-track.org), a website that tracks spacecraft. It puts the number of satellites operated by China at more than 930.

Officials in both India and US have warned that China's People's Liberation Army is becoming a greater threat in space. Beijing's satellite program has rapidly expanded in both scale and sophistication, Indian Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit cautioned in June. The central government now is working with startups to find the right solutions, the people familiar with the matter said.

Although the discussions are still in the early stages, the goal could be to launch Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) satellites to identify threats quicker, providing enough time for technicians to send orders for the targeted satellite to reposition itself.

Isro played an important national security role during Operation Sindoor. More than 400 scientists worked to support the Earth observation and communication satellites. Isro chairman V Narayanan said. At the time, China provided Pakistan with support, helping Islamabad adjust its satellite coverage, a research group under the Union defence ministry said in May.