

IAF quietly shooting down 'Chinese spy balloons' at high altitudes

Contingency Plan Drawn Up After Last Year's US Incident

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New Delhi: The IAF has quietly been practising shooting targets mimicking Chinese spy balloons at very high altitudes, with the latest instance being of an omni-role Rafale fighter jet using an air-to-air missile to bring down such a target in the eastern sector a few months ago.

The IAF began drawing up contingency plans for such an eventuality after a 200-foot-tall intelligence-gathering Chinese balloon flew over conti-

mental ~~US~~ for several days in Jan-Feb 2023 before it was finally shot down by an American F-22 Raptor using an AIM-9X Sidewinder missile. The US had shared information with India and other countries about the incident.

"The IAF formulated TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures) to handle such contingencies. It has been practising the capability to interject in such situations at different flight envelopes," a source told TOI.

"Rafale's demonstration



SPIES IN THE SKIES: US Navy sailors with the remains of a Chinese spy balloon after it was shot down in Feb 2023

was at an altitude of over 55,000 feet, way over what had been practised earlier. The target balloon, with a payload, was relatively smaller than the Chinese one that violated US airspace," he added.

The fifth-generation F-22 flying at an altitude of 58,000 feet, had launched the missile to hit the balloon at an altitude of well over 60,000 feet on Feb 4 last year.

The IAF's 4.5-generation

Rafale, which are armed with the 120-150-km range 'Meteor' and 70-km MICA air-to-air missiles among other weapons, in turn, went after the target that was flying at an altitude of over 55,000 feet.

Chinese spy balloons, which are akin to huge unmanned airships and capable of sending "burst transmissions", are difficult to detect and intercept since they have low radar cross-sections and fly at very high altitudes.

In early 2022, a high-altitude balloon-like object was spotted over the strategically located Andaman and Nicobar islands but nothing much could be done because India as yet does not deploy fighters on

the archipelago on a permanent basis, though IAF fighters do operate from the islands on short-term detachments for exercises.

China, of course, also regularly deploys its 'spy' vessels in the Bay of Bengal and southern India Ocean to track India's ballistic missile launches as well as map oceanographic and other data useful for navigation and submarine operations.

The IAF has based its 36 Rafales at the Hasimara and Ambala airbases. Hasimara is close to the Sikkim-Bhutan-Tibet tri-junction and the strategically-vulnerable Siliguri Corridor on the eastern front with China.

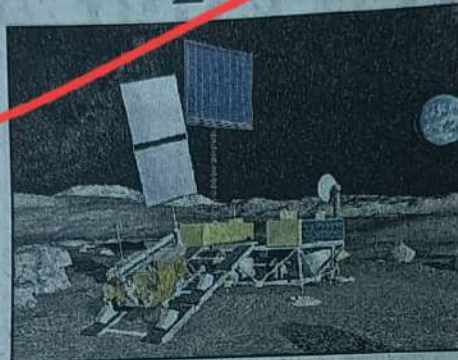
Go-ahead for 5th Moon mission, Japan to be expedition partner

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Bengaluru: India, whose lunar ambitions have been more clearly articulated now than a decade ago, is firing on all engines, with the National Space Commission clearing the fifth lunar mission — the Lunar Polar Exploration Mission or Lupex. The commission is the apex body that decides on space missions.

Unlike missions Chandrayaan 1 to 4, this will be jointly implemented by India and Japan but is part of India's lunar series that eventually aims to send an Indian to the Moon and bring her/him back. The Union cabinet cleared Chandrayaan-4 on Sept 18, and Lupex will be put up for cabinet clearance soon, although the commission nod gives Isro the go-ahead to work on the mission.

"We wanted some more approvals (from cabinet) to happen. Possibly, in the coming days, they will also get



An illustration of the Moon mission shared by Japanese space agency Jaxa

approved... We must have a series of Chandrayaan missions which will build up the capability from the current level to the one which will actually send humans to land on the Moon and bring them back," Isro chairman S Somanath told **TOI** in an exclusive interview.

The Lupex mission is aimed at exploring the Moon for water and other resources and gaining expertise in exploring its surface.

"At present, it is at the technical discussion level. Commitment from the Japanese side is known. They have assigned the development of

the rover to a firm. Also, their govt has allocated money for the project and they've identified their launcher for it," Somanath said.

Although Isro and Japanese space agency Jaxa signed an agreement in 2017, one of the challenges that prevented work on Lupex after India's Chandrayaan-2 mission — as was the initial plan — was the inability to demonstrate soft-landing of the lander on the lunar surface.

"...So, we took it up after Chandrayaan-3 soft-landing. We found that the configuration of Lupex spacecraft needed total re-engineering. Also, it should align with the long-term vision of our Moon programme. It cannot be just a replication of whatever we've done, but it should add features, which would ultimately become useful for human landing," Somanath said. He added Isro has completed re-engineering the spacecraft, which called for the development of a new lander engine.

Muizzu: Will never hurt India's security interests

'Male First, But Will Prioritise Ties With Delhi'

Photo: PTI



Maldives Prez Mohamed Muizzu, with wife Sajidha, arrives in Delhi on his first state visit to India

“India is one of our biggest development partners, and defence cooperation will always be a priority. In these globally challenging times, with regional wars threatening the security of all countries, it is vital to foster these collaborations... And I can confidently say, Maldives and India now have a better understanding of each other's priorities and concerns. India is a valued partner & friend of the Maldives — MOHAMED MUIZZU

New Delhi: As the dramatic improvement in India-Maldives ties in recent months culminated in President Mohamed Muizzu's first state visit to India that started on Sunday, the president told **TOI's Sachin Parashar** in an exclusive inter-

TOI INTERVIEW

► **JAISHANKAR LIKENS UN TO 'OLD CO, A BYSTANDER', P8**

view that the Maldives would never do anything that undermines the security of India.

Before his meeting with PM Modi on Monday, and amid concerns over the neighbour's growing ties with China, Muizzu said while Male continues to en-

hance cooperation with other countries in various sectors, it remains committed to ensuring that its actions do not compromise the security and stability of the region. Muizzu said India is a valued partner and friend of the Maldives. While follo-

wing a 'Maldives First' policy, he said his country will prioritise ties with India. **He, however, justified the expulsion of Indian troops, saying it reflected the will of local people.**

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Bibi dials Macron after he calls for halting arms supply

Tells France Prez Placing Restrictions On Israel Will Strengthen Iran & Its Proxies

Jerusalem: Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu spoke by telephone with French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday, his office said, and told him that placing restrictions on Israel will just serve Iran and its proxies.

Macron said on Saturday that shipments of arms to Israel used in the war in Gaza should be stopped as part of a broader effort to find a political solution to the conflict. "Just as Iran supports all parts of the Iranian terror axis, so are Israel's friends expected to support it, and not impose restrictions that will only strengthen the Iranian axis of evil," Netanyahu told Macron, according to a statement from his office.

Israel has sharply escalated its attacks on Iran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah in recent weeks. The Israeli govt says it aims to allow Israelis to return to their homes in northern Israel, after being evacuated amid Hezbollah rocket attacks that began on Oct 8 last year.

"The prime minister emphasised that Israel's actions against Hezbollah create an opportunity to change reality in Lebanon to better stability, security and peace in the entire region," the statement said.

The French presidency said in a statement that Macron reaffirmed his country's "unwavering commitment" to Israel's security in the call, while insisting on a ceasefire in Gaza and Lebanon. The two leaders agree-



'Shame on them,' Netanyahu said on Saturday of Macron and others who have called for what he described as an arms embargo on Israel, calling the move a disgrace

ed to maintain a dialogue on the matter during the French foreign minister's visit to Israel on Monday, the PM's office said.

Macron told France Inter radio on Saturday that the priority was "to get back to a political solution (and) that arms used to fight in Gaza are halted. France doesn't ship any". "Our priority now is to avoid escalation. The Lebanese people must not in turn be sacrificed, Lebanon cannot become another Gaza," he added. France is not a major weapons provider for Israel, shipping military equipment worth €30 million last year, according to the defence ministry's arms exports report.

On Saturday, Netanyahu had hit out at Macron. "Shame on them," Netanyahu said of Macron and other Western leaders who have called for what he described as an arms embargo on Israel. "Israel will win with or without their support," he had said in a pre-recorded video released by his office, adding that calling for an arms embargo was a disgrace. REUTERS

UN a bystander, hasn't kept up with times: EAM

'Countries Are Now Figuring Out Things On Their Own'

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Comparing the United Nations with an "old company", external affairs minister S Jaishankar on Sunday called the global agency a "bystander", which had failed to keep up with the times and did not adequately respond to global crises, from Covid to the current conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia.

"The UN is like an old company, not keeping up with the market, but occupying the space. When it's behind the times, in this world when you have innovation and startups, they would like to mainstream that into the market and see if the principal players are in tune with these trends. But when they are not, countries, as companies do, start doing things on their own. So, what you have today is a UN, at the end of the day, however suboptimal it is in



UN will continue, but increasingly there is the non-UN space which is the active space and it's telling on the UN, Jaishankar said

its functioning, it is the only multilateral game in town. When it doesn't step up on key issues, countries figure out their own ways of doing it," he said at the Kautilya Economic Conclave.

He cited the example of Covid, arguing that the UN did not fully lead the international response to the pandemic, and also conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia to make his point. "Where is UN

on them? Essentially a bystander. What is happening."

He pointed to the emergence of Quad to deal with challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, the India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor for connectivity, and bodies like the International Solar Alliance as organisations that had come up outside the UN system to tackle specific problems. "UN will continue, but increasingly there is the non-UN space which is the active space and it's telling on the UN," he said.

For several years, India has been seeking reforms of multilateral bodies, including the UN, to reflect the new global order, with the external affairs minister earlier this year suggesting that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council were "short-sighted" in their approach and were holding up the revamp.

Israel batters south Beirut, hits Gaza mosque

Israeli air attacks battered Beirut's southern suburbs overnight and early on Sunday in the most intense bombardment of the Lebanese capital since Israel escalated its campaign against Iran-backed Hezbollah last month. An Israeli strike on a mosque in

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the Gaza Strip early Sunday killed at least 19 people, Palestinian officials said. Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant warned Iran it might end up looking like Gaza or Beirut if it was considering an attempt to harm Israel. **P 13**
