



An artist's rendering of a Biarri satellite containing components built by DST Group and UNSW.

DEFENCE

Ukraine proposes a spaceport for Australia

Ewen Levick | Sydney

Much of the coverage of the 2018 Budget has focused on the \$41 million the government has allocated to Australia's space industry, which includes seed funding for the establishment of a national space agency.

Yet Australia's growing investment in the space sector has already been noticed overseas. In late March, [reports](#) emerged suggesting that the government of Ukraine wants to build a spaceport in Western Australia.

The State Space Agency of Ukraine has highlighted the Curtin air base in the Kimberley, near the town of Derby, as a potential site. The proposal is backed by WA senator Linda Reynolds and has spurred plenty of excitement from town officials and state representatives.

ADM got in contact with Ukrainian ambassador Mykola Kulinich to find out more.

"We are at the very beginning of our dialogue with Australia," Ambassador Kulinich explained. "We've made the first steps, exchanged notes of interest."

"Happily, we have a newly-formed Australian space agency that is in charge of Australia's space program. We have had some successful dialogue with experts and the Ministry of Industry and Innovation, so we have some preliminary cooperation."

He was keen to stress, however, that there are not yet any concrete plans.

"We have something to propose to the Australian side, but I'm stressing we are not starting yet."

Nevertheless, the Ambassador highlighted the strength of the proposal given Ukraine's expertise in launch technology and Australia's burgeoning investment in the space sector.

"We have know-how, we have ideas, and we have projects, and you have territory, you have investment possibilities. We should cooperate on this.

"This is a trend of your economy and scientific work. Australia definitely wants to be a space country, and we started a dialogue. We have our proposal from the Ukrainian side, and I've transmitted it to your government, to [Senator] Linda Reynolds."

One of the reasons Ukraine is seeking to build a new launch site is that the country no longer has access to Russian sites following the breakdown in relations in 2014. The following year, Brazil unilaterally withdrew from a decade-long joint project that would have seen Ukrainian Cyclone-4 rockets launched from the Alcantara spaceport, citing questions of cost and market viability.

"Before we worked with Brazil and had joint plans to build a launch site," Ambassador Kulinich explained. "Unfortunately we also have difficulties with the Russian Federation. They were a partner, but starting in 2015 we stopped any cooperation with Russia and now we cannot use any launch sites. So we are looking for a partner."

Ukraine's fortunes turned in 2017 when it signed a memorandum of understanding to provide launch vehicles for Canada's first spaceport, which is currently under construction in Nova Scotia. The Canadian government hopes to launch eight commercial satellites a year beginning in 2022. Ukraine also has a launch agreement with the US.

The deals with Canada and the US could serve as a template for a future Australian spaceport. The Ambassador highlighted the countries' common strengths.

"There are not many countries in the world that have, geographically, a good location for a space program. In Australia you have an ideal geographic location and spare territory to make a launch site," Ambassador Kulinich said. "We also have our joint venture with the US, and we are supplying the launch stage for their rocket launchers. So why not Australia?"

When asked what the spaceport would be used for, the Ambassador said that it would be for civilian purposes only.

"100 per cent scientific and commercial programs. For example, communications satellites, any other commercial satellites, or for weather, meteorology, and so on. There is a big line for those waiting to launch commercial satellites, so this is a very good market."

Whilst there is no timetable currently in place, Kulinich said that the Ukrainian space agency will send a delegation to Australia to continue discussions.

"We plan it this year, and we can propose some kind of menu of what we can do. The second step is for your government to consider what we can do from this list. So we are waiting for our delegation to come and launch a negotiation about possible future programs.

"My message is strong – we are ready for cooperation in the space sphere. We are waiting for signals from the Australian side."

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