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Smart Dragon 3 getting ready for 2022 launch

Rocket to meet surging demand for commercial satellite launch services

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China Aerospace Science and Technology Corp, the nation's leading space contractor, plans to carry out the maiden flight of its Smart Dragon 3 carrier rocket next year, a company executive said.

Li Hong, deputy general manager at the State-owned conglomerate, said on Sunday that research and development of the new rocket began at the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology in December. Designers expect to conduct its first flight in the first half of next year.

"Its first mission will be based on a launch platform at sea," Li said on the sidelines of the ongoing fourth session of the 13th National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. The researcher is a member of the top political advisory body.

A four-stage solid-propellant

rocket, the Smart Dragon 3 will be the largest and strongest in the Smart Dragon fleet, said Li, former president of the academy.

With a diameter of 2.64 meters and a liftoff weight of 140 metric tons, the rocket will be able to send multiple satellites with a combined weight of 15 tons to a sun-synchronous orbit at an altitude of 600 kilometers. It can be launched from the ground or at sea.

In China and many Western nations, an increasing number of newly founded private companies have started designing and building satellites, generating huge demand for commercial launch services. Many of these privately made satellites are set to operate in sun-synchronous orbits.

Smart Dragon 3 will be suitable for clients who wish to launch a large number of satellites within a short period of time to establish space-based commercial networks as soon as possible, Li said.

"The new model will feature an

attractive price, high reliability as well as short production and launch periods, and therefore will be competitive in the commercial launch market," he said.

Smart Dragon 1, the first model in the family, conducted its maiden flight in August 2019.

It marked the emergence of China's fourth family of carrier rockets, after the Long March series, Kuaizhou series, and the SQX of privately owned space startup i-Space in Beijing.

Smart Dragon 1 is 19.5 meters tall, has a diameter of 1.2 meters and weighs 23.1 tons.

China has developed and brought several new rockets to market over the past five years. Many of them are solid-propellant models that are comparatively smaller than traditional liquid-fueled types like the Long March series.

Space industry observer Lu Yufei said that solid-propellant rockets are especially suitable for time-sensitive or short-notice missions, which have become more common than before due to surging demand from the booming commercial satellite business.