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India's Agni V Missile: Game Changer?

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Synopsis

India's Agni V missile is said to have profound implications for its security. But its strategic significance is complex and the picture is at best a mixed one.

Commentary

INDIA'S LAUNCH of the Agni V, an intermediate-range missile close to intercontinental range, has been widely hailed as a "game changer" and a "milestone" in India's quest for security. Now that the applause has died down, it is worth looking a little more closely at the claim.

In fact, at least three "games" can be identified and the performance is mixed: the first and most touted game is irrelevant, the second is a winning game, and the third a losing one.

Deterring China: Inconsequential Game

The main achievement of the Agni V is said to be its enhanced reach. With a range of 5,000 km, it is capable of targeting all of China (read Beijing and Shanghai) from deep inside Indian territory. But the notion that Beijing and Shanghai must be targeted in order to deter China is questionable. It involves the untenable assumption that Chinese leaders will be willing to dispense with smaller but still large cities that are closer to India. Kunming, with a population of over five million is less than 1,500 km from Kolkata. Guangzhou, with a population of over 10 million is about 2,500 km from Kolkata. In both cases, existing intermediate-range missiles with ranges of 2000-3000 km (Agni-II and Agni-III) fired from the Indian northeast would suffice to cover the distance.

One need only consider whether the Indian government would be willing to disregard the targeting of Ahmadabad or Jaipur or Patna in a confrontation with China to appreciate the point. The standard riposte would be to point out that missiles deployed in the northeast would be "vulnerable" to a first strike. But that does not stand up to scrutiny. No one contemplating a first strike can be certain of eliminating all of an adversary's forces, especially when they are in mobile basing mode. In short, the Agni-V does not change the deterrence game vis-à-vis China.

Strategic Politics: Winning Game

Ironically, the erroneous notion that the Agni V is a “game changer” does change, though not radically, another game – that of the US-China-India strategic triangle. It does so because much that goes by the name of “strategy” boils down to a combination of perception and interests. Notwithstanding the admonitory finger wagging that followed India’s 1998 tests, both the United States and China accommodated India. A key landmark was the changing of US domestic law and the rules of the international cartel, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, to allow nuclear civilian trade with India. The twin changes in effect recognised the reality of India’s nuclear weapons status because the agreements incorporated the formal classification of Indian nuclear facilities into civilian and military. It is hard to imagine that this would have happened without India having crossed the testing threshold.

The Agni V test has already evoked a similar reaction. Washington and Beijing, in contrast to 1998, have responded mildly with peace-oriented murmurs. Leading American experts have welcomed the test as a “major step” in deterring China and noted that the US is “comfortable with Indian progress in the nuclear and missile fields”. The Chinese response has been varied, from a foreign ministry spokesman’s call for cooperation between “emerging powers” to a Global Times commentator’s assertion that China’s nuclear power is “stronger and more reliable” and that “India would stand no chance in an overall arms race with China”. Either way, India’s strategic profile has been enhanced. For better or worse, it will play a more significant role in global strategic politics.

Security and Deterrence Strategy: A Losing Game

India started down the path of nuclear weapons capability as a reluctant nucleariser. China’s 1964 test triggered only a relatively limited and low-key research and development programme; a single test in 1974 was not followed by the building of an arsenal; and warhead development made a slow, covert beginning circa 1989. Following the 1998 tests, India announced it would not test again, opted for a “recessed” non-deployed posture, and foreswore arms racing with its rivals. Since then, a gap has opened up between its still minimalist posture and a widening programme of weapons development. The source of this gap is the uncritical adoption of basic strategic principles from American nuclear-strategic orthodoxy.

In the early years of the Cold War, American nuclear strategy came to rest on the notion of “assured second-strike capability” enunciated by the RAND analyst Albert Wohlstetter. The centrepiece of his position was that the United States had to be certain of responding with a massive retaliatory strike after absorbing a surprise Soviet attack. This meant building an arsenal characterised by varied capability, high accuracy and short response time revolving around a nuclear “triad” of land- air- and sea-based weapons systems. With the Soviet Union adopting a like approach, both powers entered into an accelerating and wasteful arms race fuelled by fears of vulnerability to each other.

On the ground, the reality was the opposite. No leader saw an advantage in having more and better weapons in confrontations with a rival: Washington had a 10: 1 advantage during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Moscow an even bigger one during the Sino-Soviet Crisis of 1969. President Kennedy’s primary thought in 1962 was: how do I avoid the dropping of a single bomb on a single city? In other words, the real-life working of deterrence rests on the unacceptability of the low probability of a high level of mass destruction within a short space of time.

What deters a potential first striker is the unknown (and unknowable) risk of a nuclear reprisal, not the certainty of massive retaliation. To put it plainly, ‘second-strike capability’ is strategically meaningless. It follows that the Agni V, the much-anticipated submarine-launched ballistic missile, and planned multiple-warhead missiles are already redundant.

India today is doing precisely what the US and the Soviet Union did during the Cold War: consuming precious resources on an ever-expanding capability that will not add to security. The fundamental reason for this commitment to a losing game is intellectual: policymakers do not seem to know what “minimum deterrence” means.

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