

SOUTH ASIAN VOICES

GENERATION WHY

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Published

December 5th, 2013

China, Doctrine, India, Missiles, Nuclear, Nuclear Weapons, Pakistan, Technology

India's Missile Modernisation and Credible Minimum Deterrence

India has been modernising its missile capabilities. It has successfully flight-tested its longer range missiles like Agni-IV and Agni-V. It has also made **efforts** (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/agni-vs-next-trial-will-be-canisterbased/article5422469.ece>) at canisterising its missiles with **statements** (http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-06-29/india/40271026_1_agni-iv-agni-vi-missile-defence) from senior DRDO officials pointing to the development of missiles capable of carrying multiple warheads. These developments have resulted in analyses (**here** (<http://blogs.fas.org/security/2013/10/indianmirv/>) and **here** (<http://web.mit.edu/polisci/news/pdf/NarangFiveMyths.pdf>), among others) which argue that India is “moving away from its stated doctrine of minimum deterrence towards one with more war-fighting like capabilities.”

Appreciating the larger context

As argued in detail **here** (<http://isssp.in/nuclear-weapons-and-deterrence/>), such arguments are a simplified understanding of a complex dynamic that underpins the relationship between China-Pakistan alliance and India. Also, such an understanding fails to take into account India's unique geo-political situation where it shares borders and a troubled history with two nuclear armed neighbours in China and Pakistan. While China has the distinction of possessing the world's fastest growing nuclear arsenal, Pakistan is home to the fastest growing nuclear stockpile in the globe today. In the background of continued Sino-Pak alliance, these developments pose an important security challenge for India.

Over the past few decades, China has made rapid advances in economic, military and technological spheres to assume a pre-eminent position in the comity of nations. China's great power ambitions have put it in direct competition with the United States. While largely directed at the US, Chinese actions have an inevitable impact on India's security. However, the analyses referred to in the above paragraphs, conveniently choose to ignore the larger fundamental drivers for the current state of affairs and prefer to focus on a small subset thereby placing the entire onus on maintaining stability on Indian shoulders.

Dr. Hans Kristensen **writing** (<http://blogs.fas.org/security/2013/10/indianmirv/>) in the FAS Security Blog dwells at length on India's move to make its missiles mobile and deploying them in 'canisterised' TELs and working to achieve shorter launch times. The author argues that canisterisation and shorter reaction times will decrease stability by triggering similar developments from China and Pakistan and by shortening decision times and increase the risk of escalation. Further, he makes a leap of judgement by stating that these technological developments in India's ballistic missile program "are worrisome signs that India may be designing its way out of its minimum deterrence posture towards one with more warfighting-like capabilities."

On closer look it is apparent that China has already canisterised its long-range, solid-fuelled missiles like the DF-21, DF-31 and the DF-31 variants. Similarly, China is believed to be deploying the MIRV capability in on its missiles as the June 2012 test (<http://isssp.in/chinas-anti-ship-ballistic-missile/>) of PRCs DF-41 establishes. India is therefore not the first mover in this field but is merely responding to the developments in its neighbourhood. It is befuddling that the article isolates developments in the Indian missile program and arrives at the perplexing conclusion that these technological advances would de-stabilize the region.

Modernisation and India's Nuclear Doctrine

Nuclear doctrines and nuclear postures are dynamic in nature. By definition they will respond to the changing security threats and the overall security environment. Dr. Kristensen correctly points out that India has a declared policy of No-First Use (NFU). However, he overlooks the point that India's **nuclear doctrine** (<http://pib.nic.in/archieve/lreleng/lyr2003/rjan2003/04012003/r040120033.html>) espouses a posture of "credible minimum deterrence" and not "minimum deterrence." The difference is crucial in understanding the recent developments.

It is widely accepted that India follows a centralized command and control. Therefore, the ability to launch missiles from canisters – which China also possesses – should not be seen as an end in itself but should be viewed in conjunction with the country's command and control

(C²) structure. In a centralized C² structure deploying canisterized missiles would not necessarily translate into a move towards acquiring war-fighting or assuming a first-strike posture. The acquisition of such a capability – as postulated by the author – does not necessarily mean that India will launch a first strike. The underlying logic in making such a leap is not very sound one.

Mobile and canisterised missiles are harder to target especially given the fact that a proportion of such missiles could also be decoys. This would in essence increase the survivability of India's nuclear forces given that it would not be possible for India's adversaries to be certain that they have indeed destroyed all of India's nuclear forces in a first-strike. This would in essence add to the credibility of India's nuclear deterrent and promote stability.

Secondly, working towards the capability to launch a second strike in the shortest possible time would strengthen India's No-First Use (NFU) policy. Given India's centralized C² structure, this would translate into India having the option to wait till the last possible opportunity before moving to heighten the readiness levels of its nuclear weapons during a conflict. During crises, this would in essence delay escalation of the conflict along the escalatory ladder. Definitely that cannot be seen as destabilising.

Also, shorter response times and an assured response would add to the credibility of India's nuclear deterrent as perceived by New Delhi's adversaries, thereby adding to the stability in the region. In any case, following the doubts introduced by China in the April 2013 **Defence White Paper** (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm) regarding its NFU, India is the only country which continues to publicly espouse a policy of No-First Use in its nuclear doctrine.

Lastly, given the dynamic nature of nuclear doctrine and postures, countries are likely to respond to changing security dynamics. Therefore, the ongoing modernisation of India's missile program in terms of improvements of their payloads, accuracy and responsiveness add to India's stated policy of "credible minimum deterrence" and New Delhi's resolve to follow through with its commitment to No-First Use. They are in essence attempts by India to preserve such technological options for the future rather than for immediate deployment. As such, these efforts are nothing but natural responses from New Delhi to the changes in its security environment rather than any move away from its stated nuclear doctrine.

For a longer version of the arguments made in this post click here (<http://issp.in/nuclear-weapons-and-deterrence/>)

