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RCAS Commentary

India's New Missiles Increase South Asia's Nuclear Arms Race

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

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India is modernizing its land-based, nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. On March 11, 2024, India successfully conducted the first flight test of the locally developed intercontinental Agni-V missile with Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle (MIRV) technology. The test reinforces India's striking punch and increases the defensive vulnerabilities of its strategic competitors. Beijing and Shanghai are now within range of MIRVed Agni-V, and Islamabad is equally endangered.

▲An Agni-V is displayed during a parade in New Delhi, India, on Jan. 26, 2013. (Raveendran/AFP via Getty Images)

The proliferation of MIRV capability alarmed nuclear non-proliferationists. The missile boosts the destabilizing emerging nuclear arms race among the world's nuclear-armed states. The integration of MIRV technology in a ballistic missile multiplied nuclear warheads, which is one of the most dangerous developments of the nuclear era. It is the quickest and most economical means to increase the number of deployed warheads by which nuclear-armed states destroy large numbers of targets. Precisely, a single-warhead missile is launched against one target, but the MIRVed missiles can dispense warheads against multiple targets.

India developed its sophisticated MIRV technology and joined the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) club. Agni-V has a range of 5,000 km, making it India's sole contender for the ICBM long-range category and allowing the Indian military to establish Agni-V bases in central and southern India, further away from the Chinese border. Therefore, the Indian ruling elite rejoiced in the Indian Defense Research and

Development Organization (DRDO) Mission Divyastra, which has been working on the MIRV technology for decades. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that MIRVed Agni-V enhanced the country's nuclear deterrence against rivals China and Pakistan.

China has modernized and expanded its nuclear arsenal as well. It has already developed MIRV capability and integrated it into its liquid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles in 2015. Hence, Agni-V equipped with MIRV makes little impact on China's defenses against India. However, India's ballistic missile modernization and development of MIRV technologies are detrimental to Pakistan's defensive fence.

India, even without ICBM, can strike everywhere in Pakistan. Still, Pakistan cannot ignore the Agni-V test because of MIRV technology. India can use the MIRV technology in its medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles.

Notably, the extended range allows India to deploy the ballistic missile units further back from the western border, preventing them from Pakistani counterforce preventive strikes.

The puzzling fact is that the Modi government claimed that on March 11, DRDO conducted the first test of MIRVed Agni-V. It disputed DRDO's previous claims about the MIRV technology. Prime Minister Modi's statement testified to the significant delays and false claims of the DRDO about the ballistic missile advancements.

The strategic dilemma for Pakistan is that India has invested immensely in missile defense systems. India's efficient missile defense system, with its capability against Shaheen ballistic missiles (with a range of 2,750 km), compels the development and integration of MIRVs on Pakistani ballistic missiles. Thus, Indian MIRV and BMD capabilities could strengthen the hand of those in the Pakistani military-industrial complex who favor the development of an Ababeel series at a faster pace to avoid falling behind in MIRV technology development and evade BMD deployment to ensure strategic equilibrium and deter India's compellence.

Pakistan has already test-launched an Ababeel medium-range ballistic missile with MIRVs in January 2017. It can carry three to eight nuclear warheads of different payloads that hit other targets.

India and Pakistan's maturity in MIRV capability will result in a massive increase in their nuclear arsenals. Both countries could upload hundreds of additional warheads onto their already-developed ballistic missile systems. Thus, using MIRVs would reflect a strategy to strike multiple targets quickly and also risk triggering a warhead race between India and Pakistan. Integrating MIRVs would invite questions about the credibility of India and Pakistan's minimum deterrent doctrines.

To conclude, the development of MIRV ballistic missiles boosts the nuclear arms race and also increases the temptation for a first strike between India and Pakistan. Thus, MIRV development is detrimental to strategic stability in South Asia.

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About Author

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