



The Disclosure from A Missile Misfiring

This editorial is based on “A Misfiring and Its Trail of Poor Strategic Stability” which was published in The Hindu on 16/03/2022. It talks about the major issue that the recent missile misfiring incident has highlighted.

For Prelims: Nuclear Weapons, BrahMos Missile, India-Pakistan Conflict, Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles Agreement, 2005, Line of Control (LoC), Missile Technology Control Regime, Hypersonic Missile Technology

For Mains: India-Pakistan Relations - Conflict, Crisis Management System, Impact of the recent incident on the relations.

The recent [accidental firing of an Indian missile into Pakistan](#) which could have led to serious, **unintended escalation of tensions** between the two nuclear-armed countries, calls for serious introspection by the two about the perils of living under the shadow of [nuclear weapons](#).

The incident **casts a shadow on the standards** of the storage, maintenance, the handling and even the engineering of high-technology weapon systems in India. But, more pertinently, the incident **highlights the sorry state of bilateral mechanisms for crisis management** between the two nuclear adversaries where there is a missile flight time of barely a few minutes.

What was the Incident and its Response?

- Recently, the Government of India acknowledged that **“technical malfunction led to the accidental firing of a missile”** which landed 124 km inside Pakistan's territory. The incident happened in the course of routine maintenance.
 - It was speculated that it was a test of **one of India's top missiles, BrahMos**, jointly developed with Russia.
 - In this regard, **India has ordered a high-level Court of Inquiry.**
- Pakistan has alleged that the incident “indicates many loopholes and technical lapses of a serious nature in Indian handling of strategic weapons”.
 - The **Chargé d'affaires** of the Indian High Commission in Islamabad was **called twice by Pakistan to convey its concerns.**
 - Islamabad termed the inquiry as ordered by India as insufficient and **demanding a joint probe.**
 - It has also **sought the involvement of the international community** to promote “strategic stability in the region”.
- The Indian and Pakistani responses to the missile (mis)firing were the best possible outcome under the circumstances given that there is **little bilateral mechanism for crisis management.**

What are the Causes of the Strategic Unstability in the Region?

The strategic stability regime in South Asia (particularly the region comprising India-Pakistan) is hardly prepared for dealing with such accidents or for enhancing effective crisis management and deterrence stability. The causes are;

- **Non-Inclusion of Cruise Missiles in Agreement:** Although India and Pakistan signed a **'Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles' agreement in October 2005**, it does not include cruise missiles.
 - Notably, the missile that was misfired, suspected to be the BrahMos, was a cruise missile.
- **Lack of Structure Bilateral Dialogues:** It has been quite long since the two sides have held their structured meetings on nuclear confidence building measures (CBMs) and conventional CBMs.
 - India and Pakistan have **not held either the 'Expert Level Talks on Nuclear Confidence Building Measures' or 'Expert Level Talks on Conventional Confidence Building Measures' for several years now.**
 - Also, **neither of the countries have any high commissioners on the other side;** there is **no structured bilateral dialogue.**
- **Chinese Interventions:** What makes the regional strategic stability regime more unstable is the fact that the third state with nuclear weapons in the region, **China, has so far refused to engage in strategic stability discussions with India.**
 - However, China has **not deterred from getting involved in the [India-Pakistan conflict](#),** apart from being in a **[military standoff with India](#).**

These elements, now with the possibility of accidental firing of missiles, make the region particularly weak from a strategic stability point of view.

What is the Pre-Notification of Flight Testing of Ballistic Missiles Agreement, 2005?

- Under this agreement, each country must provide the other an **advance notification on the flight test it intends to take** for any land or sea launched, surface-to-surface ballistic missile.
 - Before the test, the country must issue **[Notice to Air Missions \(NOTAM\) or Navigational Warning \(NAVAREA\)](#)** to alert aviation pilots and seafarers, respectively.
- Also, the testing country must **ensure that the launch site is not within 40 km, and the planned impact area is not within 75 km of either the International Boundary (IB) or the [Line of Control \(LoC\)](#).**
 - The planned trajectory should not cross the IB or the LoC and **must maintain a horizontal distance of at least 40 km** from the border.
- The testing country must **notify the other nation "no less than three days in advance** of the commencement of a five day launch window within which it intends to undertake flight tests of any land or sea launched, surface-to-surface ballistic missile".
- The pre-notification has to be **"conveyed through the respective Foreign Offices and the High Commissions"**.

What Steps Can Be Taken?

- **Revival of Bilateral Dialogue Mechanisms:** Provided the nature of the India-Pakistan relationship — adversarial, nuclear-armed, crisis prone, and suffering from trust deficit — there is an urgent need, especially in the wake of the recent incident, to revive the two dialogue mechanisms - **Expert Level Talks on Nuclear and Conventional CBMs.**
- **Updating Existing Mechanisms and Agreements:** India and Pakistan urgently require **faster mechanisms for communicating sensitive information during crisis** periods and peacetime given how quickly the two sides are capable of transitioning from peacetime to a crisis.
 - Also, it is important to **include cruise missiles in the pre-notification regime** as they are now a part of each side's arsenal.
- **Establishment of Mechanism like NRRCs:** India and Pakistan should consider setting up mechanisms such as **Nuclear Risk Reduction Centres (NRRCs)**, as established between the

U.S. and the Soviet Union during the [Cold War](#).

- The primary objective of NRRCs is **risk reduction by providing a structured mechanism for timely communication** of messages and **proper implementation of already agreed upon CBMs**.
- Such a mechanism could act like the '[Permanent Indus Commission](#)' which has resolved several disputes arising out of the [Indus Water Treaty](#).

▪ **Centres For Information Clarification:** Some of the misperceptions and ambiguities in the strategic domain could be taken up by the **risk reduction centres for resolution or clarification**.

- Such a body could **routinely exchange messages, provide timely clarifications, and review compliance to agreements**, among others.
- In an age of social media and 24-hour news, honest mistakes or unforeseen accidents could spiral into a military standoff especially in the absence of timely clarifications.

▪ **Maintaining its Position of a Responsible Nuclear Power:** India's **global image of being a responsible nuclear power** has been built over decades of restrained words and thoughtful action. **The recent incident frays this reputation**.

- India became a member of the [Missile Technology Control Regime](#) in 2016, an acceptance by major powers of India's status as a reliable defence partner that is capable of handling its strengths and contributing to global security.
 - India is developing more missile systems, including a [hypersonic variant](#). The handling and the launch of any such missiles are highly regulated with checks and balances to avoid accidents.
- **India must leave no scope for any doubts about its capacity** to handle nuclear and other military assets. Strict measures must be taken to **restore the confidence of the international community in India**.

Drishti Mains Question

"The recent missile misfiring incident casts a shadow on the standards of the maintenance, and handling of high-technology weapon systems in India. But, more pertinently, it highlights the sorry state of bilateral mechanisms for crisis management between the two nuclear adversaries". Comment.

Previous Year Questions:

Q. What is "Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD)", sometimes seen in the news? (2018)

- (a) An Israeli radar system
- (b) India's indigenous anti-missile programme
- (c) An American anti-missile system
- (d) A defence collaboration between Japan and South Korea

Ans: (c)

Q. With reference to Agni-IV Missile, which of the following statements is/are correct? (2014)

1. It is a surface-to-surface missile.
2. It is fuelled by liquid propellant only.
3. It can deliver one-tonne nuclear warheads about 7500 km away.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (a)

Q. In the context of Indian defence, consider the following statements: (2009)

1. The Shourya missile flies with a speed of more than 8 Mach.

2. The range of the Shourya missile is more than 1600 km.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) Both 1 and 2

(d) Neither 1 nor 2

Ans: (d)

Q. From which one of the following did India buy the Barak anti-missile defence systems? (2008)

(a) Israel

(b) France

(c) Russia

(d) USA

Ans: (a)

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