



## 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 **demanded 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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