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Signs of an Asian Arms Buildup in India's Missile Test

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India's successful test on Thursday of a long-range ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead is the latest escalation of an arms race in Asia, where the assertiveness and rising military power of China has rattled the region and prompted a forceful response from the Obama administration.



The Agni 5 missile was launched from Wheeler Island off the eastern coast of India on Thursday.

By launching the Agni 5, a ballistic missile capable of reaching Beijing and Shanghai, India joined a small club of nations with long-range nuclear capability, including China, Britain, France, Russia, Israel and the United States. The missile was launched Thursday morning from a small island off India's eastern coast, a day after the test had been scratched because of weather.

Indian leaders celebrated the successful test, even as Pakistan and China reacted warily, amid growing international apprehension about the increasing militarization of Asia.

The Obama administration, while still trying to extract itself from Afghanistan, is now cultivating alliances with Asian nations and redirecting its strategic and military focus toward Asia to manage China's new military clout.

China announced double-digit increases in military spending last month, and some Chinese military leaders have accused the United States of trying to contain China's rise.

Still, many Asian nations, spooked by aggressive Chinese claims on maritime rights and other issues, have welcomed a vigorous American presence in the region.

[The Philippines and the United States began joint military exercises on Monday](#), including mock beach invasions along coastlines facing China, as part of a strengthening military alliance between the two countries. A contingent of American Marines arrived in northern Australia two weeks ago, the first of 2,500 troops to be deployed there under an agreement signed last year.

South Korea, which on Thursday tested a missile capable of striking any location in North Korea, has already moved close to the United States. Also on Thursday, officials from the United States and Bangladesh met in the capital, Dhaka, to discuss security issues.

Perhaps no Asian nation has been more unnerved by rising Chinese power than India.

The two countries share a growing trading relationship and are often aligned on global issues like trade and [climate change](#). Yet many Indian strategic planners now regard China, rather than Pakistan, as the country's gravest military threat. In recent months, India's military has been wracked with internal scandals and personality clashes, yet defense officials have pushed ahead with a major arms-buying spree that has made India the world's biggest weapons importer.

India and China share a 2,100-mile border, which [both countries have beefed up militarily in recent years](#). But the Agni 5 missile tested Thursday — Agni means fire in Hindi — would enable the Indian military, for the first time, to reach China’s most important cities, Beijing and Shanghai, with a nuclear attack.

“All of this, from the Chinese perspective, looks like a movement from balancing China to containing China,” said Graeme P. Herd, a security expert at the Geneva Center for Security Policy. He said the timing of the missile launching, as the Chinese government is reeling from a scandal involving a top leader, would heighten Chinese suspicions and also “increases the perception of an arms race, and the reality of an arms race, in East Asia, particularly between China and India.”

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of India praised the scientists who developed the missile and called the launching “another milestone in our quest to add to the credibility of our security and preparedness and to continuously explore the frontiers of science.”

The United States, [which led the criticism of North Korea’s missile launching](#) last Friday, appeared to warily endorse the Indian missile test. “We urge all nuclear-capable states to exercise restraint regarding nuclear capabilities,” said Mark C. Toner, a State Department spokesman. “That said, India has a solid nonproliferation record,” he added, and noted that India had a “no first use” policy on [nuclear weapons](#).

In Beijing, Liu Weimin, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, played down the test and described India and China as “not competitors but partners,” adding that the two countries should “work hard to uphold friendly strategic cooperation,” according to news agencies. CCTV, China’s state-run television network, questioned the accuracy of the Agni 5’s guidance systems and said the missile’s 50-ton weight would force it to be launched from a fixed location, making it an easy target.

India said the missile could be launched from a mobile platform, a claim that raised immediate concerns with India’s traditional rival, Pakistan, which is also a nuclear power.

Mansoor Ahmed, a defense analyst based in Islamabad, said that the missile added to India’s growing second-strike capabilities, particularly if India can construct a naval version of the Agni 5 to deploy on its nuclear-powered submarines. A sub-based missile “can be deployed beyond the reach of a Pakistani first strike, thus ensuring survivability of its nuclear force,” he said.

Although that advance would alter the strategic balance in South Asia, Mr. Ahmed called Thursday's test "China-centric" and said it was unlikely to have an immediate effect on Pakistan-India relations.

Pakistani Foreign Ministry officials said they had been notified in advance of the test by India, and made no further comments.

India's military abilities, strategic and conventional, still lag far behind China's, whose missiles can hit targets 6,200 miles away.

The 51-foot-long Agni 5 reached an altitude of about 430 miles in the test, the Indian government said, and has a range of 3,100 miles. By United States measures, that distance technically makes it an intermediate missile, short of the 3,400-mile minimum that defines intercontinental ballistic missiles, though such quibbling means little if China is the aim.

"Agni 5 will give India complete coverage of targets in China," Poornima Subramaniam, an Asia-Pacific armed forces analyst at [IHS Jane's Defense](#), said in an e-mail. "Agni 5 technologically narrows the missile gap between India and China, while the strategic balance between the two rivals is still tipped in China's favor."

India fired its first satellite into orbit in 1980, and began its missile development program in 1983. It tested the Agni 4, with a range of 2,200 miles, in November. The Agni 5 simply added a third stage, the new engine giving the missile greater kick.

Analysts say that given India's skills in launching heavy satellites and planetary probes, it could easily field a missile powerful enough to send warheads over intercontinental ranges.

Despite India's insistence that the missile exists for deterrence only, its range raises questions about the country's aims and risks escalating the regional arms race.

"Everyone forgets about U.N. Security Council Resolution 1172, which calls upon India and Pakistan to cease development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons," Paul K. Kerr, a nonproliferation expert with the Congressional Research Service, said in an interview.

He said that when China, India and Pakistan fire missiles, it "has potential ripple effects, and there's no arms control among the three."

There was also opposition in India, where some questioned the wisdom of an expensive missile program while hundreds of millions of the country's citizens live in dire poverty.

“It is ridiculous,” said Praful Bidwai, a researcher and columnist associated with the Coalition of Nuclear Disarmament and Peace. “We are getting into a useless arms race at the expense of fulfilling the need of poor people.”

But the criticism was muted compared with the near-universal condemnation of North Korea, which launched a rocket last week that fell apart moments after takeoff. “India’s record stands in stark contrast to that of North Korea,” the White House spokesman, Jay Carney, insisted, noting that the Security Council had sanctioned North Korea over its nuclear weapons program.

That contrast served India well on Thursday.

“We have achieved exactly what we wanted to achieve in this mission,” Avinash Chandra, mission director for the test, told the Times Now news channel.