



How the World Is Ignoring a New Nuclear Trajectory in South Asia

By

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Amidst rising nuclear tensions, another missile race is unfolding in South Asia. In recent years, a substantial expansion of India's missile program, primarily focusing on long-range missiles, has taken place. India's missile expansion signifies a major shift in its military posturing, evolving from deterrence against China and Pakistan towards achieving global reach. These developments complicate security dynamics in South Asia, further undermine international nuclear frameworks, and could pose a threat to United States' interests.

India's missile development began in [1988](#) with the short-range Prithvi (150–350 kilometers), followed by the medium-range Agni in 1989 (1,200–2,400 kilometers, nuclear-capable). By 1997, India deployed 24 Prithvi missiles near the Pakistan border—remarkably, without facing US sanctions.

India's missile arsenal comprises ballistic, cruise, and anti-ballistic systems across all ranges. While its short- and medium-range missiles primarily target Pakistan, India can already reach all of China. India's development of longer-range systems includes the [Agni-V](#) (5,000–7,500 kilometers) and the [Agni-VI](#), which has a potential range [up to 10,000 kilometers](#) and is [reported](#) to carry multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV) and is usable as a fractional orbital bombardment system. It also has sea-based options like the [K-4](#) and [K-5](#) submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM).

These capabilities signal India's broader ambitions for global power projection and prestige. Its capabilities now include operational intercontinental ballistic missiles, multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and [anti-satellite weapons](#), marking a shift from regional defense to strategic reach.

Since the formation of the Indo-US strategic partnership in the early 2000s, convergence of strategic interests between Washington and New Delhi has allowed India to benefit from the global nuclear framework, mainly, the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Missile Technology Control Regime. India, like Pakistan, is not a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and has developed its nuclear capabilities independently.

While Pakistan is not a member of the Missile Technology Control Regime, [India has been since 2016](#). Through an exemption to non-nuclear-weapon states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, the [Missile Technology Control Regime](#) membership is helping India to advance its missile program by providing access to advanced missile technology. Similarly, in 2008, through the [Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver](#), India increased its nuclear production capacity.

The world powers, especially the US, continue to turn a blind eye toward these perilous developments in the region and beyond. Overlooking New Delhi's global reach with nuclear-capable missiles could be a strategic mistake by Washington. India may, at some point in the future, reassess its strategic alignment with the United States and determine that the partnership no longer aligns with its national interests, raising the possibility that India could emerge as a challenger to American interests, or worse, align with China.

In retrospect, the US and [China supported the mujahideen](#) resistance to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, though they did not coordinate their efforts. Later, China would emerge as a competitor to the US globally. Similarly, supporting India against the Chinese threat in the future could become a threat to the US.



The same blind eye on the development of India's missile programs might hit American interests in the region hard. To give credence to these facts, a plethora of credible think tanks, including [Goldman Sachs](#), the world's second-largest investment bank, predict that India will have the world's second-largest economy by 2075. As a result, India will emerge as a direct economic threat to the US, which could translate into a future military challenge.

Checking India's missile program is not only in the interest of the US but, more importantly, good for global nuclear governance. It is currently marked by ineffectiveness due to the discord between nuclear "haves and have-nots."

American policy on South Asia continues to overlook key regional developments, focusing instead on Pakistan's missile program despite broader nuclear trends. Former Biden administration officials like [Vipin Narang](#), [Pranay Vaddi](#), and [Jon Finer](#) raised alarms about Pakistan's pursuit of a long-range missile, labeling it an emerging threat—despite Pakistan's India-centric military posture and lack of global targeting ambitions.

It is important to investigate the historical and security dynamics in South Asia. Pakistan's missile program began in the late 1980s after India began to demonstrate its missile capabilities. Pakistan's missile program represents the country's India-centric and defense-oriented approach.

For instance, the short-to-medium-range systems (70–2,750 kilometers) are capable of targeting India from within Pakistani territory. The development of [multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle](#) capability by Pakistan aims to penetrate India's advanced missile defenses, thereby strengthening deterrence. The [Shaheen-III](#) missile, with a range of 2,750 kilometers, meets Islamabad's requirement to have full coverage of India, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

In the same way, the development of tactical nuclear weapons was in response to India's Cold-Start Doctrine. This aims to deter conventional incursions with battlefield nuclear use. Thus, acquiring an intercontinental ballistic missile capability is not in Pakistan's strategic interests.

The silence of the international community on this urgent matter is resulting in the erosion of global nuclear governance. Amidst rising tensions between nuclear states, the world is seeing recurring violations of established rules and international norms. The international community cannot move toward effective arms control arrangements that are aligned with evolving threats, disarmament, and strategic restraint under these conditions. Efforts for global peace and security can never be meaningful until threat perceptions and security challenges are addressed, including the resolution of long-standing disputes between archrivals.

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