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Beyond the Sparks and Fumes of India's Agni-V Test

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Abstract

India now exudes confidence at having come of age as a space-faring power with a minimum credible nuclear deterrence. A follow-up task awaits New Delhi. It must prudently send out the right political message across to China and other major powers. Both China and India have consistently enunciated the principle of no-first-use of nuclear weapons in the conduct of international affairs. The two countries have also regularly called for the non-militarisation of space. It is, therefore, insightful commonsense that India and China should now be able to move towards meaningful engagement based on the principles of trust or at least 'trust but verify'.

Introduction: Techno-Nationalism

A post-modern dictum is: Space-faring leaders among states will dominate global affairs of the future in much the same way as the major sea-faring nations had in fact done in the past. The reasoning is quite simple but profound.

Space is man's new frontier for the foreseeable future, while the high seas were at one time the uncharted expanse across Planet Earth. Another similarity is that the compass of space-faring enterprise will cover as wide a spectrum as in sea-faring activities. The space-faring agenda of a country can promote not only its developmental objectives but also its military purposes of enhancing its defensive and/or offensive capabilities. In today's international

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political discourse, such a high-tech agenda is increasingly being described as ‘techno-nationalism’.

In such a conception, India’s success in test-firing the nuclear-capable Agni-V long-range ballistic missile on 19 April 2012 can be suitably viewed as an affirmation of ‘techno-nationalism’.

Basking in the after-glow of Agni-V, officials of India’s Defence Research and Development Organisation, the architects of this missile, have in fact celebrated the event as a gigantic technological leap for ensuring the country’s security. India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the success as “another milestone in our quest to add to the credibility of our security and [defence] preparedness and to continuously explore the frontiers of science”.²

Taking due care, Singh did not identify the country or countries against which India was now reinforcing its security profile. However, a virtual tug of war in words ensued between the non-official commentators in India, on one side, and several opinion-makers in China with varying degrees of links to the Chinese establishment, on the other. On the whole, the Indian commentators are convinced that Agni-V has more or less placed India on par with China in the high-tech space-age domain of skills to design, develop, build, and launch inter-continental ballistic missiles.

A Chinese Reality Check

A Chinese view, as reflected in Global Times, a newspaper believed to be close to the long-governing Communist Party of China, is no less stark. The paper’s oft-quoted comment is: “India should not overestimate its strength. Even if it has missiles that could reach most parts of China, that [scenario] does not mean it will gain anything from being arrogant during disputes with China. India should be clear that China’s nuclear power is stronger and more reliable. For the foreseeable future, India would stand no chance in an overall arms race with China”.³ The paper further cautioned India against participating in any international project aimed at “containment of China”.

These oft-quoted comments from China and the nationalistic triumphalism in India have, on the whole, puzzled and even dismayed observers in East Asia, where both Beijing and New Delhi are seen as players into the future.

² ‘New Delhi: PM congratulates DRDO scientists and technical personnel on Agni test launch success’ April 19, 2012, .<http://www.pmindia.nic.in>. Accessed 19 April 2012.

³ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/NEWS/tabid/99/ID/705627/India-being-swept-up-by-missile-delusion.aspx>

Significantly, what has been generally missed amid all these sparks and fumes is a Chinese reality check which, too, has been articulated in Global Times in the same article that contains the passages quoted earlier.

*The reality check runs as follows: “China and India should develop as friendly a relationship as possible. Even if this cannot be achieved, the two should at least tolerate each other and learn to co-exist. ... It would be unwise for China and India to seek a balance of power by developing missiles. The geopolitics of Asia will become more dependent on the nature of Sino-Indian relations. ... China understands the Indian desire to catch up with China. China, as the most appropriate strategic target for India, is willing to take India as a peaceful competitor”.*⁴

As part of this reality check, some concerns have also been expressed in China that a mood of triumphalism in India could disrupt the recent gains of Sino-Indian cooperation in a multilateral setting. Noteworthy in this regard is the recent initiative by the BRICS forum – which consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – to study the feasibility of setting up a South-South Development Bank.

America’s Agnostic Stance

Conspicuous too, beyond such a Sino-Indian bilateral perspective, is the new tendency in some international circles to look at New Delhi under the prism of the United States (US). The reason is not far to seek: the growing perception that the US and India are slowly but surely gravitating towards each other in a bid to act in concert wherever and whenever possible for shaping the now-unsettled global order. In this context, the US, while taking the line that “we always urge all nuclear-capable states to exercise restraint”, has evidently declined to condemn India on its Agni-V launch. Washington is equally emphatic about India’s “solid non-proliferation record”⁵ on the global stage.

Ignored by Washington in this context is a parallel perception in some US quarters that New Delhi is engaged in vertical proliferation, i.e., the ‘sovereign’ right to proliferation within India to enhance its defence capabilities. In contrast, non-proliferation is shorthand for the restraint by a nuclear-capable country in transferring to external players its own nuclear arms or knowhow or their parts and the related delivery systems that could destroy targets in war. Not to be missed in this maze of euphoria in India, caution and a reality check in China, besides America’s politically agnostic stance, is the politics of space as applicable to New Delhi and Beijing in the civilian and defence domains.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2012/04/188120.htm#INDIA>. Accessed 20 April 2012.

Quoting from Yanping Chen's work on "*China's Space Policy: a historical review*", Michael Sheehan says in *The International Politics of Space* that "the Chinese space programme has had strong ties to the military from its inception"⁶.

Moreover, the US Defence Secretary's 2004 and 2005 reports on *The Military Power of the People's Republic China*, took serious note of what was described as Beijing's "counter-space" initiatives such as anti-satellite (AST) weapons. Such perceptions and Beijing's successful "kinetic kill" of a non-functioning weather satellite in a deemed AST experiment, have led to the world-wide impression of China as a premier space-faring power in the military domain.

China's Space Prowess

Not to be missed in the international discourse on China as a space-faring power is its phenomenal success in exploring space for civilian purposes of science and national economic development. In 2003, China sent its first *taikonaut* (astronaut), Yang Liwei, into space, and in 2008, Zhai Zhigang became the first Chinese to perform the space walk. Before China, only two other countries had achieved these feats – Russia (Soviet Union) and the US. China's rising space profile has prompted a space scholar, Neil deGrasse Tyson, to write in *Foreign Affairs* as follows: "For the past decade, I have joked with colleagues that the United States would land astronauts on Mars in a year or two if only the Chinese would leak a memo that revealed plans to build military bases there. The joke does not seem quite so funny anymore. Last December (i.e., in 2011), China released an official strategy paper describing an ambitious five-year plan to advance its [Beijing's] space capabilities"⁷.

China does not fight shy of its space-faring prowess. But Beijing, like New Delhi too, has consistently advocated non-militarisation of space in general and non-placement of weapons in space in particular.

India's space-faring story is narrated with much empathy and accuracy by scholars like Michael Sheehan. He writes: "Though [India's] contemporary programme is in dramatic contrast to Indian [economic] underdevelopment and [is] a striking achievement for a newly independent country, India in fact has a long historical legacy in terms of interest in astronomy and rocketry. [Globally] The earliest written account of anything resembling a space launch can be found in ancient Sanskrit texts such as the *Rig Veda* and the *Mahbharatha*, which speak of a vessel called *Vimana* ascending to heaven. The *Vimana* is

⁶ Michael Sheehan, *The International Politics of Space*, Routledge London and New York, 2007. P. 160

⁷ *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2012, *The Case for Space* by Neil deGrasse Tyson, p.23

described as giving ‘forth a fierce glow, the whole sky was ablaze, it made a roaring like thunderclouds’ and then took off.⁸”

Vedic Vimana

The resemblance between such a graphic account and the flawless Agni-V lift-off as an “intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)” is really remarkable. There is, of course, one significant difference between the trajectories of these two space-bound objects. Whereas the description of the *Vedic Vimana*’s lift-off corresponds to that of a civilian space launch of a satellite, the test flight of Agni-V was designed to use a dummy payload to ‘kill’ a dummy target at an ICBM range of about 5,000 km somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

Also to be noted, though, is that India’s successive governments have guided the country’s civilian space programmes to address down-to-earth economic issues of poverty, education, and public health at home. The scientific dimension of India’s space-faring skills is no less known.

Addressing the Indian Parliament in November 2010, US President Barack Obama referred to India in the grammatical usage of second person and said: “The world sees the results [of India’s indigenous efforts] from the supercomputers you build to the Indian flag that you put on the Moon”⁹.

Now, with the success of Agni-V test flight, India exudes confidence at having come of age as a space-faring power with a minimum credible nuclear deterrence. So New Delhi faces an urgent follow-up task of sending out the right political message across to China and other major powers. Both China and India have consistently enunciated the principle of no-first-use of nuclear weapons in the conduct of international affairs. It is, therefore, insightful commonsense that India and China should now be able to move towards meaningful engagement based on the principles of trust or at least ‘trust but verify’.

Such a choice by both India and China at the same time will help them consolidate the “gains” already made in the bilateral sphere and also take a realistic view of each other’s security concerns on the international stage.

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⁸ Michael Sheehan, *The International Politics of Space*, Routledge London and New York, 2007. P 144

⁹ P S Suryanarayana, *India’s Place and ASEAN’s Primacy in the New East Asia*, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, 2011, p. 239