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THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA'S LATEST ICBM TEST IN THE PACIFIC

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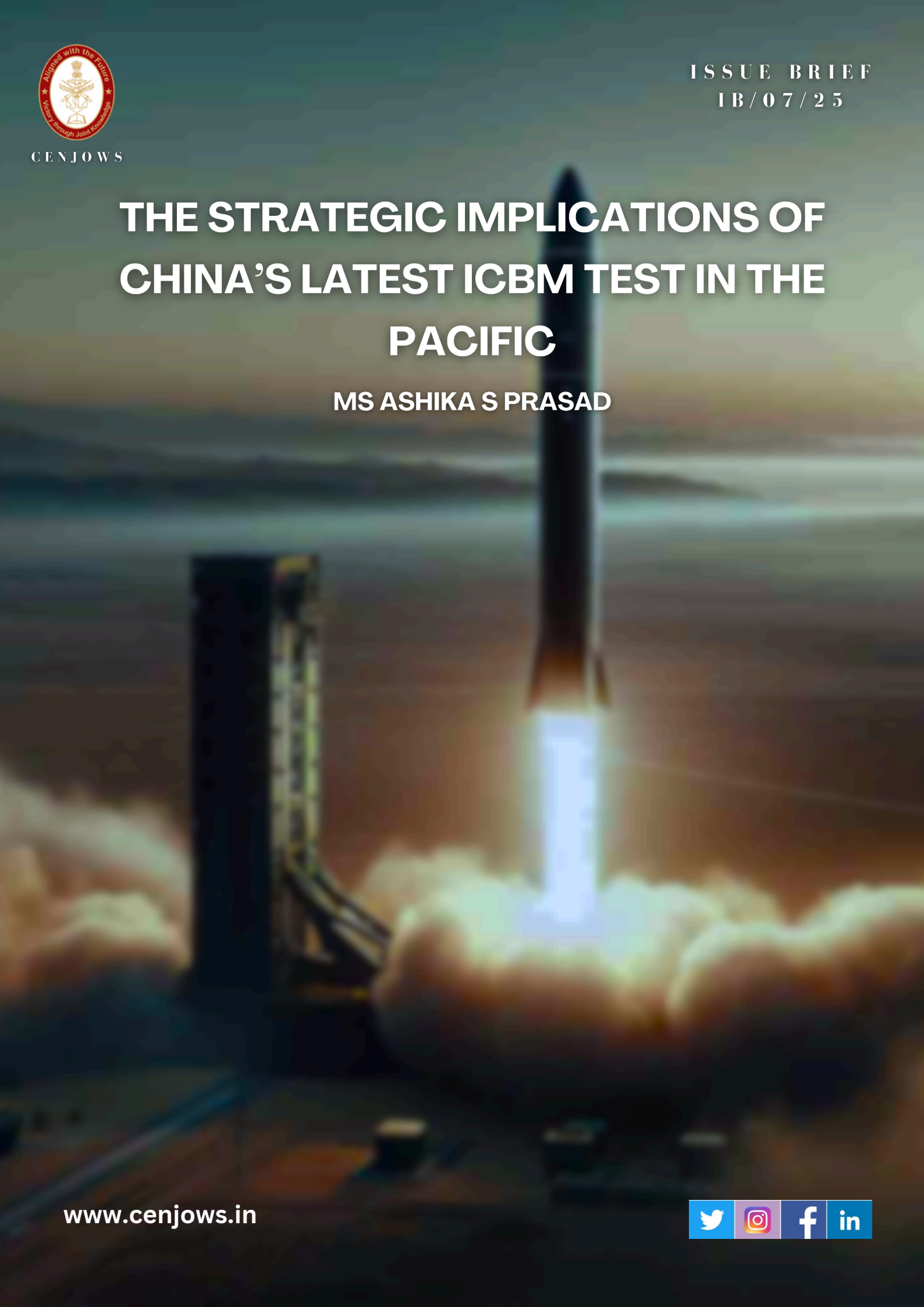

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THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA'S LATEST ICBM TEST IN THE PACIFIC

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Abstract

The missile ecosystem in the Indo-Pacific region is determined by the perceptions and behaviour of actors that possess missile capabilities in the region. The concept of security dilemma in international relations can best explain the missile race and insecurity in the Indo-Pacific. With the recent conduct of missile tests by China, North Korea etc., the security in the region has again come to focus. This paper seeks to understand the implications for the missile test by China for the security environment of the region and also its impacts for India's security calculus.

Introduction

On September 25, 2024, China made headlines with a rare Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) test in the Pacific Ocean, a move that sent shockwaves across the global security landscape. This test, conducted by the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF), was particularly significant because it marked China's first ICBM launch in international waters since 1980. Unsurprisingly, it grabbed the world's

attention, especially at a time when concerns over missile proliferation and rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific are already at an all-time high. China claimed that “this missile launch is a routine arrangement for annual military training, which is in line with international law and international practice and is not aimed at any specific country or target”.[1] They were quick to add that the launch wasn’t aimed at any specific country or target. But such assurances do little to ease the growing unease among regional and global powers. The implications of this test go far beyond a simple military exercise; they hint at a deeper shift in the balance of power and raise serious questions about the future of global security.

The missile itself is no ordinary weapon. It represents a major leap in China’s military capabilities, with the potential to overturn the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific. Its advanced range, precision, and payload capacity are a clear signal of China’s growing technological edge and its confidence in projecting power far beyond its borders. For countries in the region—like India, Japan, and Australia—this is a wake-up call. For global heavyweights like the United States and Russia, it’s a reminder that the rules of the game are changing. The test isn’t just about flexing military muscle; it’s a statement of intent, showcasing China’s ambitions to play a dominant role on the world stage. At the same time, it exposes the inadequacies in the current arms control frameworks, which seem increasingly outdated in the face of rapid technological advancements and the complexities of modern warfare.

This paper aims to unpack the many layers of this ICBM test and its ripple effects. It will explore how this event could fuel the already simmering missile dilemma in the Indo-Pacific—a region already on edge due to competing interests and a surge in militarisation. By examining the technical capabilities of the missile, the geopolitical backdrop of the test, and the mixed reactions from the international community, this study will shed light on the broader strategic shifts taking place. It will also delve into the challenges this poses to global arms control efforts and the very real possibility of an arms race in the region. As the world watches China’s growing assertiveness, understanding the fallout of this test is more important than ever. It’s not just about the missile launch, but about what it means for the future of stability and security in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Missile Dilemma in the Indo-Pacific

The security dilemma is one of the major concepts of IR under the realist school of thought that explains the state behaviour in an anarchic international system. Pioneers in realist theory like Herbert Butterfield, Robert Jervis and John Herz and later scholars like Booth and Wheeler, Glaser, etc, laid the theoretical foundations of the security dilemma and the consequent spiral. The security dilemma is simply defined as a situation where "the actions by which one state tries to increase its security decrease the security of other nations"[2]. The theory posits that, given the anarchic nature of the international system, the primary goal of every nation is to maximise its security. For instance, when one state increases its military capability through weapons procurement, etc, for defensive purposes, other states might interpret this as a threat to their security and, in turn, end up amassing weapons. The main factor at play in such scenarios is how states perceive each other. Misperceptions and misjudgements about one state's intentions can escalate the security dilemma.[3]

The missile situation in the Indo-Pacific can best explain the scenario of the security dilemma. The current strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific region is complex with the rise of multiple actors in the region. The region has witnessed a proliferation of advanced missiles- ranging from ballistic missiles that are conventional and nuclear capable to cruise missiles and hypersonic weapons. Given the nature of proliferation, the regions face both conventional and nuclear risks. The uncertainty about the intentions of various nations fuels the missile dilemma in the Indo-Pacific. The arms build-up by nations, which they may consider a defensive act, is perceived as a threat by other nations, leading to mutual suspicion. This particular security dilemma is evident in the strategic rivalry between the US and China that has escalated the tensions in the Indo-Pacific region.

The longstanding influence of the USA in the region, be it through military and naval bases, air presence, etc, is perceived as a threat by China. China has, in the recent decade, been intensely modifying its military, including deploying advanced intercontinental ballistic missiles like the DF-31AG and DF-41, alongside cutting-edge hypersonic glide vehicles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles to counter-balance this US sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific.[4] These steps aren't just about flexing military muscle; they are reshaping the traditional balance of power, where the U.S.

has held sway. A report released by the Stimson Centre analyses the evolving missile threat from China to US airbases. Chinese missiles have the potential to strike US forward bases in Japan, Guam, and other Pacific locations, and countermeasures by the US using existing capabilities like deployment of more aircraft, maintaining high runway repair capabilities, and advanced missile defences would not suffice.[5]

Apart from this, China's increasing assertiveness and growing military power in terms of missiles, nuclear arsenals, etc, build fear among the other Indo-Pacific nations and have triggered them to strengthen political alliances with the US in an attempt to enhance their military capabilities.[6] The mutual actions of both states are perceived as defensive by them, but this has intensified the security dilemma in the region, thereby creating a spiral.

North Korea keeps pushing forward with its ballistic missile tests, now able to reach the U.S. mainland. Their development of tactical nuclear missiles adds another layer of tension to the already volatile Korean Peninsula. With the added complexity of emerging technologies like hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs), artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled systems, and anti-ballistic missile defence systems, the security calculus for nations in the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly fraught with risk.[7]

At the same time, South Korea is enhancing its defence capabilities with missiles like the Hyunmoo-4 and exploring submarine-launched options, even with the U.S. security umbrella overhead.[8] Japan finds itself in a tight spot, considering the need for long-range strike capabilities against the backdrop of rising threats from neighbouring China and North Korea. India is also making efforts with its Agni-V ICBM and hypersonic missile development as deterrents against potential future aggression from China and Pakistan.[9] In the other ocean, the U.S. is bolstering defence in the Indo-Pacific by deploying such systems as THAAD, Aegis Ashore, and the new Typhon missile defence system to counter China's increasing military reach.[10] Meanwhile, Russia is boosting missile exercises in the Pacific, suggesting perhaps tighter military collaboration with China.[11]

The complex web of military modernisation is remaking old power relationships and alignments based on the profound interests and apprehensions of states vying for security and influence in the fast-changing world. Policymakers and strategists might view the proliferation of missiles as a strategy of deterrence on the one hand, but, on

the other hand, we cannot deny the fact that such proliferation is expanding the security dilemma in the region.

Characteristics of the Tested Chinese Missile

There is a lack of consensus among the observers on the nature of the missile tested by China, and most assumed that the tested missile was the DF 31 AG, which is China's second-generation nuclear missile. DF-41 is China's longest-range missile with an operational range of approximately 12,000 to 15,000 km with a payload of 2500 kg and the ability to carry up to 10 MIRVs as warheads.[12]

China's Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology (CALT) initiated the development of the DF-41 in July 1986 under Project No. 204, which was later integrated into the DF-31 missile program[13]. Renewed efforts in 1994 led to the testing of DF-41 prototypes, and by 2010, deployment-ready missiles were handed over to the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF). The missile underwent several tests, including its first flight test on July 24, 2012, followed by subsequent tests in 2013, 2014, and 2015, with advancements such as independently-targeted warheads and a rail-mobile launcher[14]. By 2019, the DF-41 had entered limited production, with its launchers prominently displayed during China's 70th anniversary parade on October 1, 2019[15]. Following the DF-31, the DF-41 became China's second ICBM to employ solid-fuel propellant. Solid-fuel systems offer the advantage of not requiring fuelling immediately before launch, reducing logistical needs and increasing survivability against pre-emptive strikes compared to liquid-fuel missiles, which demand more extensive preparation.[16]

The DF-31, translating to "East Wind-31," is one of three intercontinental ballistic missiles currently fielded by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Entering service in 2006, the three-stage DF-31 and its variants are capable of carrying either a single warhead or multiple smaller warheads. Recognised as China's first solid-fuel, road-mobile ICBM, the DF-31 has an operational range of about 4,470 miles, though its base model cannot target the continental United States from China.[17] China has developed three main variants of the DF-31- the DF-31A, DF-31AG, and a silo-based version. These upgrades feature extended ranges and enhanced manoeuvrability. The DF-31AG, in particular, is nuclear-capable and equipped with an improved missile vehicle that offers better off-road capabilities, enabling deployment in diverse terrains[18].

For China, this missile strengthens its nuclear triad's credibility, comprising land-based missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers. Such advancements not only bolster China's deterrence strategy but also signal a shift in its approach to securing strategic parity with global powers like the United States.

Broader Strategic Implications of the ICBM Test

- **Restoring Credibility Post-Scandals**: The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) conducted this test to reaffirm its credibility, both domestically and internationally, following a series of corruption scandals and significant leadership changes. These developments had likely caused doubt about the force's operational capabilities.[19]

- **Framing the Test as a Military Drill**: China sent a deliberate message about its combat preparedness by categorising the missile launch as a "military drill" rather than as part of a technological research program. The test was not merely about advancing missile technology but was meant to project military strength, readiness, and competence, both regionally and globally.

- **Pre-Launch Notification and Risk Mitigation**: The Pentagon confirmed that it had received prior notice of the missile test from China, a step that is unusual in the context of Beijing's traditionally secretive approach to military activities. This move could mark the beginning of a new era of transparency and communication aimed at reducing the risk of misinterpretation and accidental escalation. If this approach is sustained, it may create opportunities for further engagement between China and other nuclear powers on risk reduction measures.

- **A Shift towards Transparency**: Unlike previous missile tests that were shrouded in secrecy, this test was accompanied by a high-profile public announcement and the release of images showcasing the DF-31AG missile launch. This newfound openness suggests that China is no longer hesitant to display its nuclear strength publicly. This transparency might also prompt other powers to adopt a similar stance during future military exercises or tests.[20] The handling of this missile test marks a stark contrast to China's approach in

1980 when it conducted a low-profile test of the DF-5 ICBM under Deng Xiaoping's policy of moderate diplomacy.[21] At that time, the missile was referred to as a "carrier rocket" to downplay its military significance. In this instance, however, the missile was explicitly identified as an ICBM carrying a dummy warhead. This deliberate transparency highlights the more assertive and bold diplomatic posture that has become a hallmark of Xi Jinping's leadership.[22]

- **Geopolitical Timing and Regional Tensions**: The timing of the test coincided with rising tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, including incidents of maritime confrontations between Chinese and Philippine vessels. Furthermore, the United States recently deployed its mid-range missile system, the Typhon, to the Philippines for exercises, and reports suggest that the system remains stationed there.[23] These developments likely influenced China's decision to conduct the test as a strategic response to assert its position amid regional power-dynamics.

- **Sending a Message to the United States**: By conducting an open missile test in international waters, China conveyed a clear message to Washington, asserting its confidence in its nuclear deterrence and its status as a significant global power. The test launch might be a warning that the continental United States will be vulnerable to a Chinese missile attack if Washington intervenes in a Taiwan Strait war.[24] The tested ICBM has a range of 12,000 km, which is approximately the distance between the Hainan islands and Los Angeles in the USA, which demonstrates the missile's capability to reach the USA.[25]

- **Strengthening Nuclear Deterrence**: The decision to conduct the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test over open waters mirrors practices commonly employed by the United States. This choice reflects President Xi Jinping's broader objective to enhance China's nuclear capabilities, a goal that has been a central focus of his military modernisation agenda since 2015. By showcasing the operational readiness and credibility of its nuclear forces, China reaffirmed its ability to maintain a strong nuclear deterrent.

- **Need for an inclusive arms control framework:** China's missile and nuclear advancements raise questions on the sufficiency of the existing arms control frameworks. The international community should revisit the US and Russia-

centric arms control agreements, for instance, the Missile Pre-launch Notification Agreement and make it more inclusive, considering China's strides.[26]

International Responses

The Indo-Pacific nations have reacted diversely to China's recent missile test. New Zealand has called the test "an unwelcome and concerning development," and Taiwan has condemned it as it "demonstrates the expansionist intentions and dangerous nature of the regime."[27] Australia, Fiji, and Palau also condemned the missile test. French Polynesia and the Republic of Kiribati were particularly concerned as they were deeply shocked that China had not notified them of the test carried out near their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ).

The Chinese government informed their United States, Australian, and New Zealand counterparts of the test, indicating a selective approach to transparency. Russia has welcomed the test as China's sovereignty right as a nation.[28] Japan has also expressed concern with this new trend of Chinese military action, most significantly upset with the absence of transparency concerning such action.[29]

Implications for India

For India, these developments hold significant security implications. Given the country's already strained relations with China and Pakistan, any provocative military activity by Beijing naturally raises concerns in New Delhi. China's missile development has worrying consequences for India as it has ramped up its weapons and counter-weapons capabilities recently. In terms of missiles and nuclear warheads, even though India is advancing, it is moving at a slow pace when compared to China. A study by the US Department of Defence (US DOD) shows that the Chinese defence budget estimates that it spends 40-90% more than it announces in its public defence budget, which is around 330-450$ billion.[30] According to this study[31], China had more than 500 nuclear warheads as of 2023, while India had around 170-180, which is almost equal to that of Pakistan.[32] India needs to develop both offensive and defensive capabilities required to confront China.

- **India's Hypersonic Missile Test and the Shifting Balance of Power:** In November 2024, India successfully tested its long-range hypersonic missile with a range of 1,500 km, marking a significant milestone in its defence capabilities.[33] India's recent technological achievement has firmly positioned it within an elite group of nations with advanced capabilities. This achievement comes at a time when China is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal, raising concerns about a potential arms race in the region. In response, India will likely fast-track its strategic weapons programs, including the Agni-V missile and other critical military advancements. Given the shifting geopolitical landscape, maintaining a strong deterrent is vital for India's national security, making ongoing investment in defence technology an absolute necessity.

- **Building Alliances to Ensure Regional Stability:** As China's military influence continues to grow, India is bolstering its own security and forging stronger global partnerships. Building strong relations with countries like the United States, Japan, and Australia has become the main area of priority, especially through initiatives like the Quad. These alliances act as a strategic counterbalance to China's rising influence and contribute to maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific. By taking an active role in regional security frameworks, India is reinforcing its position as a key factor in shaping a balanced power dynamic in the region.

- **Navigating Diplomacy: Competing While Cooperating:** China's growing military presence leaves India with a delicate foreign policy challenge. While competition is unavoidable, India must also pursue diplomatic engagement to prevent tensions from escalating into conflict. Striking the right balance between rivalry and cooperation will be crucial, especially in international forums where both countries hold considerable influence. Maintaining this equilibrium is essential to ensure that military rivalries do not overshadow broader economic and diplomatic efforts.

Conclusion

China's leaps in missile technology, including advanced systems like the DF-31AG and DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), are changing the game globally.

These advancements aren't just shaking up the traditional military dominance of the U.S. and Russia—they're also sending ripples across the region, particularly for India. Neighbouring countries are now scrambling to rethink their defence plans, ramp up military readiness, and build stronger partnerships to stay ahead in this shifting security landscape. But with all this rapid progress, there's a growing urgency for updated arms control agreements that make sense in today's world. These frameworks aren't just about stopping an arms race—they're about preventing dangerous miscalculations that could spiral into conflict. As the global power balance keeps evolving, diplomacy and cooperation between nations have to take the lead in keeping things stable. A future built on trust and teamwork, rather than endless competition, is the only way to ensure lasting peace. In a world that's more connected than ever, security isn't just about having the biggest arsenal—it's about creating an environment where dialogue, understanding, and collaboration come before confrontation.

DISCLAIMER

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