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India's Anti-Satellite Test

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On 27 March, 2019, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared his country to be a 'space power'. He announced that India has successfully tested an Anti- Satellite (A-SAT) weapon i.e. an Indian ground-launched missile shot down one of India's test satellite in the low earth orbit (LEO).

It is a significant development with implications for international security and regional stability in South Asia. Meanwhile, its timing is critical as well: the test was announced just two weeks before elections begin in India.

With demonstration of ASAT capability India has joined the exclusive club of countries along with United States, Russia and China, which possess such capability. Following the test, Acting U.S. Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan expressed concerned about the space debris resulting from the test. NASA Chief Jim Bridenstine called India's ASAT test as "terrible, terrible thing" and stated that such activities in space are unacceptable as debris pose threat to future spaceflights of astronauts.

It is, however, worrisome that none of the major powers condemned the destabilizing Indian action. China ignored the military aspect and hoped that nations will retain peace in the space. Russia acknowledged the Indian announcement and called on New Delhi to join the Space Preservation Treaty proposed by Russia and China at United Nations General Assembly in 2006.

Pakistan also condemned the Indian test. Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for avoiding actions that can 'lead to the militarization' of space. Islamabad also urged international community to commence work towards developing international instruments to prevent military threats relating to outer space." It was a timely reminder to India and other nations, which have demonstrated such a capability. The pace of military utilization of space has accelerated as a result of such activities. The strategic objective, analysts believe, is to move towards 'weaponisation of space'.

Mindful of such an eventuality, UN has worked towards avoidance of arms race in outer space. For instance, in 1967 Outer Space Treaty (OST) was introduced. It forms the basis of international space law, and governs actions of state parties in exploration of outer space, although it doesn't outlaw militarization and weaponisation of outer space. It, however, specifically bans placements of weapons of mass destruction in outer space.

Since 1985 talks on a proposed 'Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space' (PAROS) treaty has been underway at Conference on Disarmament (CD). Even after three decades, they remain inconclusive due to different approaches of major powers, notably, U.S., Russia and China. Indian ASAT test has brought the focus back on the PAROS treaty and the need to address gaps in international space regime related to military activities in the outer space.

In South Asia, India's recent attempt of space militarization has direct implications for strategic stability. It demonstrates continuation of India's interest in acquiring Ballistic Missile Defence capabilities. It is an indication of developing 'hit-to-kill' systems, whereby interceptor missiles are launched to destroy an incoming ballistic missile. It is a technological demonstration.

The message for Pakistan is that the second strike capability might not be secure in the future. It is a move towards offensive nuclear strategy, one with the possibility of thinking about under-taking disarming strikes first in a conflict. Even if India doesn't adopt the strategy, it is developing suite of capabilities required to undertake such a strike, if need be.

Expanding defence and technological cooperation with the U.S. enables India to acquire dual-use technologies and enhance its capabilities. It opens up new avenues of strategic competition and arms race in South Asia. Pakistan will be compelled to find responses to emerging technological challenges from India. Given Pakistan's resource constraints, the pursuit of a similar capability or acquiring a BMD system of its own would prove to be a daunting task. Therefore, economical counter-measures would need to be developed. Demonstration of MIRV capability was an attempt to neutralize the challenges posed by India's BMD systems. Now Islamabad will, undoubtedly, have to engage Beijing in expanding bilateral cooperation in space technologies to restore strategic balance with India.

Revitalising multilateral diplomacy, however, is need of the hour. India's ASAT test has brought back international focus on the absence of legally-binding instruments to regulate activities in outer space. Pakistan can lead regional and international efforts for reviving international diplomacy, and generating pressures on international public opinion. Such a strategy can lead to commencement of negotiations for PAROS treaty.

About Author: *The author is Senior Research Officer at Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI).*