

POWER IN SPACE: ON MISSION SHAKTI

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[India has entered an elite space club](#) with the Defence Research and Development Organisation blowing up a satellite in a Low Earth Orbit into smithereens. Such Indian capability to take out moving objects has never really been in doubt: the DRDO announced it as early as in 2011. Indeed, India has been in the business of testing long-range missiles for years, although public attention on the space programme has been mostly on its civilian and scientific aspects. The military dimension, though always latent, had not seen a verifiable demonstration as in the case of Mission Shakti, the Anti-Satellite (ASAT) missile test. The display of technological prowess through the test accentuates the military dimension and brings into play an overwhelming assurance of what the Ministry of External Affairs describes as a 'credible deterrence' against attacks on India's growing number of space assets. Although only three other countries, the U.S., Russia, and China, have previously demonstrated this capability, it is possible to surmise that countries with long-range missiles could do the same with equal effectiveness. But India, surely, is staking a forward claim as a space weapons power.

The Hindu Explains: What is significant about Mission Shakti?

While the country celebrates the test as a scientific achievement, it must also dwell on the possibility that this might goad its none-too-friendly neighbour Pakistan into a competitive frenzy. Also, in the absence of a credible threat to India's space assets from China or any other country with Anti-Satellite missile capabilities, whether the 'deterrence' sought to be achieved by this test would lead to a more stable strategic security environment is not certain. There are other questions, too. Will the test spur space weaponisation? Prime Minister Narendra Modi, [while announcing the success of the test](#), was clear that India wanted to maintain peace rather than indulge in warmongering. And, by targeting a low-orbit satellite, the missile test did the utmost possible to minimise space debris, which is an issue of international concern. But, within India, the timing of the test, when the country is already in election mode, does raise concerns whether this was aimed at the domestic constituency. The Election Commission is now seized of the question whether the [Prime Minister might have violated the Model Code of Conduct](#). If it does find the timing amiss, the Modi government could be in for some serious embarrassment. Ideally, the test should not have been a matter for a partisan political debate, but given the hypernationalist political plank of the Bharatiya Janata Party, Mission Shakti might have more reverberations on the ground than it has had in space.

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