

PASSING ASAT

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The anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon test conducted by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on Wednesday is more about Delhi's changing approach to space weapons than a great technological breakthrough. But the significance of this long overdue change in India's space mindset was masked by the political pieties of the Foreign Office in explaining the ASAT test. Delhi's urge to package consequential strategic actions in meaningless mantras goes back to May 1974 when India called its first nuclear test a "peaceful nuclear explosion". Last month, the government described its attack on a terror training camp at [Balakot](#) in Pakistan as a "non-military pre-emptive action". That verbal dissimulation did not impress Pakistan, which reacted shortly with an airstrike of its own on Indian military bases. India's self-righteous rhetoric leads to self-deception and an underestimation of how the rest of the world — especially China and Pakistan — might respond to India's strategic moves.

But first to the ASAT test. India may only be the fourth country testing an ASAT weapon. But it is a distant fourth to the US, Russia and China. The first ASAT tests by Washington and Moscow go back to the 1960s. President Reagan's "Star Wars" programme announced in 1983 triggered a second wind to ASAT development. China tested its first ASAT weapon in 2007. All three have stepped up their work on space weapons since. Beijing and Moscow are said to be close to deploying space weapons. In the US, President Donald Trump has announced the intent to create a space force that can fight wars in the dark yonder. India has a long way to catch up. India's ASAT test — which targeted a satellite in a low earth orbit of 300 km — builds on its already demonstrated missile defence systems. Finance Minister [Arun Jaitley](#) conceded that India has had ASAT capabilities for long and claimed that the UPA government had denied permission to develop and test them.

One ASAT test based on modest technologies, however, is no substitute to the long overdue policy debate on India's security challenges in the outer space environment. Although space has become an arena for great power jousting and the technology to build space weapons has advanced rapidly, Delhi seemed happy arguing in international forums against the weaponisation of outer space. Despite the growing dependence of India's armed forces on communication and reconnaissance satellites, the civilian leadership has resisted the development of effective higher defence structures to manage the emerging space threats. Delhi's explicit demonstration of space weapon capabilities is welcome, but it must be part of a clearly articulated military space doctrine that identifies India's political objectives and technological goals in outer space and the strategy to realise them.

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