

US-CHINA MISSILE RIVALRY OPENS UP NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

We could push for a global no-first-use nuclear treaty and an edge in space situational awareness

China has been showing off its hypersonic missiles for the past several years. That Chinese scientists have been publishing papers reporting their advances in such a sensitive field indicates that Beijing wants the world to know that it is developing these weapons. The US government is quite obviously aware of this. So one would not expect Washington to be greatly surprised to find that China has tested hypersonic missiles a couple of times this year.

Yet, reports in the *Financial Times* and elsewhere have had US officials expressing shock at this development and comparing China's hypersonic missile tests to a "Sputnik moment", a Cold War reference recalling how the Soviet Union surprised the world in 1957 by being the first to put an artificial satellite in orbit. We do not have the full details and Beijing's missile is bound to be innovative in some ways, but the official reaction in Washington seems to be exaggerated.

Also, while hypersonic missiles are certainly a technological advancement over plain old ballistic missiles, they do not alter the big picture much. No country has the capability to defend itself against a nuclear attack by an adversary. Even without hypersonic missiles, for all the hype around missile defences, the US is vulnerable to Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles. That is why Beijing has increased its inventory of ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) in recent years and built hundreds of new missile silos to dispatch them.

Far from initiating a new arms race, the new missiles that China and Russia are deploying are a response to Washington's 2002 decision to withdraw from the anti-ballistic missile treaty and invest in ballistic-missile defence. The Americans started trying to make their walls impenetrable. The Chinese and Russians are responding by ensuring that they can penetrate those walls. This is actually a good thing because vulnerability to nuclear attack is the basis of strategic deterrence and world peace. Unfortunately, every additional warhead and delivery mechanism raises the risk of an accidental nuclear war. This is exacerbated in the present circumstances by the disinclination of Washington, Beijing and Moscow to work out confidence-building measures, forget about arms control.

Beijing is quite likely exaggerating its technological capabilities to create an atmosphere of awe and fear to dissuade potential challengers in the region. Playing up its capability to strike the US homeland with ICBMs and hypersonic missiles helps in persuading Americans in general that a confrontation with China is perhaps not a good idea. However, such posturing can backfire. This week US President Joe Biden reaffirmed Washington's commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. Nuclear deterrence, after all, is a two-way street.

Indeed, Washington's unwarranted public consternation on the count of China's hypersonic missile tests may well be part of its defence establishment's political-bargaining process. As any parent will attest, a reliable way for a child to get an expensive gadget is to tell the parent that "the other kid already has it!" We can expect the US Congress to allocate bigger budgets for both hypersonic weapons and missile defence.

What does this mean for India? The current trajectory of US-China relations opens three important opportunities.

First, New Delhi should seize an emerging interest in arms control to reframe the issue from non-proliferation to non-use of nuclear weapons. India is ideally placed to champion a Global No First Use (GNFU) treaty as the first step. Beijing, like India, has a no-first-use policy, and a post-Trump Washington is likely to be more receptive to the idea. A window of opportunity is opening up and Indian diplomacy is well capable of seizing it.

Second, even as China, Russia and the US develop hypersonic missiles and their counter-defences, Space Situational Awareness (SSA) becomes extremely important. With the recent liberalization of India's space industry, Indian companies can aim to acquire a competitive advantage in the tracking of space objects, both from the ground as well as from space. Not only is an independent SSA crucial for space defence, but it has the potential to become strategic technology that other countries will require.

Third, New Delhi can take advantage of space reforms by focusing public investment in the physics, materials and engineering of anti-satellite and hypersonic systems. The point is not so much to emulate the path chosen by China or the US, but to acquire enough of a knowledge base in key technology areas that keep options available.

Meanwhile, should we be concerned about China's hypersonic missiles? As an advocate of minimum credible deterrence, I would argue that as long as China remains vulnerable to India's nuclear weapons, the size and sophistication of Beijing's arsenal need not concern us too much. The bigger China's arsenal, the bigger the problem... for Beijing. New Delhi has wisely achieved strategic deterrence without getting into an arms race. We should stay the course.

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