

## **After the fireworks, time for some diplomacy**

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The successful test launch of the Agni V intercontinental ballistic missile takes India a step closer to mutual nuclear deterrence with China. But only diplomacy can make that relationship a stable one.

New Delhi's missile development is understandable, given its strategic situation. But the timing of the launch — hot on the heels of the North Korea rocket failure — has put India's friends in an awkward spot. The United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Australia and others who generally wish India well in its strategic rise are being compelled openly to acknowledge that some countries' strategic missile tests are much more acceptable than others.

The fact is a stable deterrent relationship between India and China is in the interest of most nations.

The problem is, much needs to be done to ensure that the current state of competitive coexistence between the two rising Asian giants does not deteriorate into one of strategic rivalry.

On the surface at least, India-China relations have seen a turn for the better in the past few months. The two countries have not only declared their intention to build a stronger bilateral relationship, but have also backed up their words with initiatives, including a dialogue on maritime security.

### **Disquiet persists**

But deeper mistrust lingers. The enduring border dispute and the legacy of the 1962 war constitute one driver of this. But each country has also built stronger security relations with the other's primary potential adversary.

India's relations with the U.S. worry Beijing, if not quite as fundamentally as China's history of military, missile and nuclear assistance to Pakistan troubles New Delhi. India fears what it sees as the encircling potential of China's growing role and interest in the Indian Ocean, while China remains anxious about the way Indian policy and Tibetan activism might interact on the border issue.

This volatile mix is compounded by military modernisation in both countries, competition for resources and influence in third countries, and competition within multilateral institutions. And sensationalised media reporting both stokes and reflects unfriendly public opinion across the Himalayan border.

### **Solutions are essential**

Solutions to these tensions demand difficult political and strategic concessions that neither country appears willing to make at this point. But the two countries will need to find a solution to avoid dangerous and unpredictable crises in the future, sparked by, for example, an incident at sea or miscalculations over Tibet.

This is not to suggest that nuclear-tinged confrontation is likely between Asia's two mega-states any time soon. The imperatives in New Delhi and Beijing to maintain a stable external environment for economic development are strong. But neither power's strategic establishment believes in peace at all costs.

India presently sees a much greater threat from China than vice-versa. China's military capabilities are designed in large part to expand Beijing's options against the U.S., even though they clearly have a mission to deter New Delhi as well.

India, on the other hand, is increasingly updating its forces with China specifically in mind, as the Agni V test demonstrates. India has at times openly described China's nuclear arsenal as a threat, and proposed confidence-building steps such as a bilateral No First Use pact. But China refuses to talk to India about its nuclear weapons in any dimension other than the question of their status under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This position is neither sustainable nor conducive to stable nuclear relations.

Just as the U.S. and China need to build a strategic stability dialogue that recognises a degree of mutual vulnerability, so too will China and India need to develop a stabilising nuclear dialogue of their own. The ranges of nuclear-tipped missiles deployed in China's western provinces are such that their only plausible targets are Indian cities. But the development of Indian missile and submarine capabilities has a way to go before it can credibly deter China.

### **Global impact**

There are also wider questions about the global impact of an India-China nuclear competition. India-China dynamics could become entangled with the India-Pakistan and China-U.S. nuclear relationships, in a cascade of security dilemmas that is making the vision of global nuclear disarmament ever more distant.

In the end, only New Delhi and Beijing have the ability or the right to address their bilateral nuclear challenge. What is clear, though, is that a big part of the answer must lie in dialogue. The unofficial bilateral dialogues on nuclear issues that have sprung up in recent years are a step in the right direction, but an official nuclear dialogue is needed if real progress is to be made.

The leaders of both countries last year acknowledged a need to respect each nation's central interests. This could provide the grounding of mutual respect for a wide-ranging strategic stability dialogue to begin. Such talks might involve Indian acknowledgement of China's legitimate interest in secure sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, while China would need to finally face the inevitable and recognise the reality of India as a nuclear-armed state. India-China relations would also benefit from Beijing moving to treat good relations with India as being more important than those it has with Pakistan.

A China-India nuclear dialogue could aim to reassure China and India about each other's intentions, the nature and purpose of nuclear and missile defence programmes, and nuclear policies and doctrines. The two countries need to discuss conflict "red lines" and crisis management, as well as to set up operational communication mechanisms at multiple levels to prevent conflict or escalation. The much-touted leaders' hotline needs to be operationalised.

Denying the existence of a problem can become a big part of the problem. Now that New Delhi has underscored its indigenous technological capacity to build a workable deterrent against China, it is time for a show of diplomatic ingenuity too.

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