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# Banning Short-Range Nuclear-Capable Missiles from South Asia

Given the geography of South Asia, there is no perfect definition of what a short-range ballistic or cruise missile is.

The NATO definition of a short-range ballistic missile is a missile with a range of less than 1000km. There is no corresponding benchmark for short-range cruise missiles, since these are rarely classified according to their range.

BY DEBALINA GHOSHAL

**I**ndia and Pakistan possess short-range ballistic missiles which are capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads. Pakistan's short range cruise missiles are also capable of carrying nuclear warheads. In addition, Pakistan has also developed a 60km range tactical nuclear weapon (TNW) called the Nasr. Such developments pose a threat to regional stability in the South Asian periphery. As these missiles jeopardize strategic stability and enhance vulnerability, a viable solution would be to ban such missile systems from South Asia.

In this article, we discuss the legal frameworks that could make such a move acceptable to both states.

## DOCTRINES OF ARMS CONTROL

India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine upholds the government's belief in nuclear arms control measures as "part of its national security policy to reduce potential threats."<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to analyze Islamabad's views on nuclear arms control measures, since Pakistan does not have a comparable, written nuclear doctrine. However, Islamabad is already a party to both the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention—the other two weapons of mass destruction under international law.<sup>2</sup>

As Pakistan strives to achieve a "credible minimum nuclear deterrent," strengthening regional stability rather than jeopardizing it would always remain the viable solution. Small but vital steps taken toward nuclear arms reduction could pave the path for nuclear arms control and, it is hoped, full nuclear disarmament in the longer term.

## PAKISTAN'S AND INDIA'S NUCLEAR-CAPABLE SHORT-RANGE CAPABILITY

For Pakistan, short-range ballistic missiles include: Hatf-1, with ranges between 70-100km; Abdali, with a range of 180km; Ghaznavi, with a range of 290km; Nasr, with a range of 60km; Shaheen I, with a range of 900km; and cruise missiles such as the air-launched Ra'ad, with a range 350km and the sea-, air-, and ground-capable Babur, with a range of 700km. All these ballistic missiles are reported to be road-mobile and solid-propelled.<sup>3</sup>

India's ballistic missile arsenal includes: Prithvi I, with a range of 150km; Prithvi II, with a range of 250km; Prithvi III, with a range of 350km; and Agni I, with a range of 700km. In order to enhance counter strike capability, New Delhi is also developing submarine launched missiles like Shaurya and Sagarika. The Agni I missiles are reported to be road or rail-mobile and are solid propelled, while Prithvi I and II are liquid propelled. Submarine-launched solid propelled missiles like the Sagarika and Shaurya strengthen India's counter-strike capability, thereby validating its "no first-use" doctrine.

Some of these short-range nuclear-capable missiles are seen as destabilizing, and if used in times of crisis, could lead to a larger-scale nuclear catastrophe. Even though nuclear weapons are under stringent command and control in both states, control could pass to battlefield commanders during a crisis, with the attendant risk of irrational decisions.

As Monika Chansoria notes, "While both nations understandably have compelling concerns for their respective defence and deterrence policies, the dangers of nuclear escalation and consequent catastrophe are equally established."<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, a viable way to avert a nuclear catastrophe, at least at a localized level, is to ban nuclear-capable short-range missiles in order to prevent an escalating nuclear conflict. Such a ban was also endorsed by Indian and Pakistani participants at a Track II workshop organized by the Stimson Centre in 2003.<sup>5</sup>

Vijay Shankar, a former Commander-in-Chief of the Strategic Forces Command in India, has also suggested the "rejection of short-range nuclear missiles" and therefore the "descent of tactical nuclear weapons as an effective Nuclear Risk Reduction Measure."<sup>6</sup>

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Analyst Monika Chansoria has proposed a ban on obsolete nuclear-capable ballistic missiles from the South Asian periphery as an effective confidence building measure. These include the Prithvi I and II for India and the Hatf I and Hatf II for Pakistan. She notes that “these systems have outlived their strategic utility for operational and technical reasons and are inherently dangerous and destabilizing due to forward deployment.” She further highlights the safety concerns regarding these obsolete missile systems.<sup>7</sup>

While Chansoria has specifically suggested banning obsolete weapons systems, this move should be extended to include those short-range missiles in each country’s arsenals that are nuclear-capable and not presently outdated.

Thus, the following steps could be taken to successfully eliminate short-range nuclear-capable missiles from the South Asian region.

1. Define short-range nuclear-capable missiles.\* The definition of short-range nuclear-capable missiles could be “any ballistic or cruise missile, ground, sea and air launched within the range of 500km.” Hence, any ballistic or cruise missile above the range of 500km should not be subject to the proposal. For both India and Pakistan, any missile with a range exceeding 500km could serve a strategic purpose. This means missiles like the Agni I, Shaheen I, Shaurya and Sagarika, as well as the Babur submarine launched cruise missile and Babur ground-launched cruise missiles, could be left out of the proposal.

At the same time, any nuclear-capable ballistic or cruise missile with range below 500km, irrespective of its launch mode, that is whether ground launched, air launched or sea launched, should fall under the purview of the proposal.

2. Convert the proposal into a treaty.\* With the implementation of a “Treaty to Ban Very Short-Range Nuclear Missiles from South Asia” both India and Pakistan would be bound to abide by the norms of eliminating their short range (below 500km range) nuclear missile capabilities. As Dr. Manpreet Sethi, puts it, “devaluing nuclear weapons would be an effective way to ultimately discard them.”<sup>8</sup> In this context, devaluation of nuclear-capable short-range missiles could result in escalation control and in the long run enable both Pakistan and India to take bigger steps towards nuclear arms control measures.

3. Emulate the INF Treaty to eliminate modern short-range missile systems.\* The Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces [INF]Treaty provides a classic example of how two superpowers agreed to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons system (that is, the intermediate-range ground-launched nuclear missiles, both ballistic and cruise). Those eliminated missiles included some of the most sophisticated systems then under development, such as the Soviet SS-20s and the US Pershings. Hence, if the INF treaty is taken as a model to eliminate both obsolete and cutting-edge missile technology, the chances of destabilization would be further reduced.
4. Effective verification body.\* A special verification body needs to be set up to verify from time to time whether both states are developing such capabilities. Stringent verification measures need to be taken on missile production sites so that these weapons are neither deployed nor produced, further ensuring a satisfactory level of transparency. Under this treaty, one of the important requirements should be that neither India nor Pakistan should be allowed to test fire missiles of ranges less than 500km.
5. Allow the modification of these missiles for conventional roles.\* Both India and Pakistan could modify nuclear-capable missiles, enabling them to carry out conventional roles. This of course would be unlike the INF treaty, which demands complete elimination of intermediate-range vehicles and does not allow these missiles to be converted for conventional use. However, for both India and Pakistan, conventionally armed short-range missiles could provide a boost to their artillery, thereby, providing an advantage to their conventional capabilities, further reducing reliance on nuclear weapons.

### **FACTORS THAT CAN HINDER THE PROCESS OF BANNING NUCLEAR-CAPABLE MISSILES**

While a mutual ban on short-range ballistic missiles appears to be a feasible and logical decision for both New Delhi and Islamabad, there are various factors which could hinder this process.

1. **Lack of mutual trust.** Since the process includes elimination of nuclear-capable missiles, it would require the two states to be able to trust each other on matters of verification. This could be a difficult task since both India and Pakistan's missiles are demated from their nuclear warheads. Hence, verification would depend on the goodwill of

the two states to provide the accurate information on the elimination process.

2. **Disagreement on TNWs.** Pakistan, which considers the Nasr to be successful in curbing any conventional attack from India, needs to be persuaded that tactical use of this missile could have a spill-over effect in its own territory. This is because these missiles would need to be deployed close to the borders during times of crisis, which could make them vulnerable to Indian artillery and air force attack. Since these missiles would be nuclear-armed, the nuclear catastrophe would hence be disastrous for Pakistan's forces.

Moreover, just like India, Pakistan too does not need TNWs to counter their adversary or adversaries. Pakistan's strategic missile capabilities, the Shaheens and Babur would be better suited as a deterrent.

At the battlefield level, Pakistan's weapons could be irrationally used if control were to pass to the battlefield commander—that is to say, command and control could be decentralized. This could in return initiate a massive retaliation from the Indian side, as already stated in its nuclear doctrine. This would mean that India might launch its counter-strike on Islamabad's counter-value targets, which could be too costly a bet for a weapon of minimal utility.

### **THE CHINA FACTOR**

While many analysts may raise the issue of the China factor, that is to include China in the nuclear arms control process, the threat from Chinese short-range nuclear-capable missiles is not relevant to Pakistan, which has had consistently close relationship with its northern neighbour.

At the same time, the China factor is unlikely to trouble India. One reason is that the nuclear threshold for India and China is comparatively high (as compared to the India-Pakistan nuclear threshold) since both China and India adopted a "no-first use" doctrine.

Moreover, any putative nuclear attack from China would likely be answered with the longer range Agni IV and V (and the not yet deployed Agni VI) missiles, not with missiles below the range of 500km. Therefore, India does not really lose even if China is not included in this agreement.

Finally, even if China were to acknowledge India's nuclear status in the near future, it does

not admit to possession of TNWs in its own arsenal.<sup>9</sup> An India-Pakistan SRBM agreement—essentially a tactical weapons treaty—may thus not attract Chinese attention because of Beijing’s blind spot regarding that class of weapon.<sup>10</sup>

## THE FUTURE

In future, both New Delhi and Islamabad must strive towards a more stable nuclear balance in South Asia. Short-range nuclear-capable missiles of range below 500km are destabilizing and such missiles need to be eliminated .

Such a small step towards nuclear risk reduction could in future lead both states to take further steps towards nuclear reduction measures.

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## NOTES

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