A number of developments have taken place recently in South Asia which further threaten the strategic stability of the region. The most recent development is India’s anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon test on March 27, 2019. This essentially militarizes space and now gives India an offensive capability in the fourth medium of warfare - space.

This, combined with India’s rapid military build-up, development of a triad of nuclear forces at land, air and sea, its purchase of 24 anti-submarine helicopters from the US and its purchase of missile defense systems like the S-400 further destabilize an already volatile region. This raises the threat levels for Pakistan which sees India as its main security threat.

India conducted its anti-satellite test in low earth orbit at 300 km altitude by destroying one of its own satellites. Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, announced the test named "Mission Shakti" in a televised address and declared India a space superpower. India is the fourth country to demonstrate such capability after US, Russia and China. Indian media and defense analysts are upbeat about the test. One analyst has gone as far as saying that India has sent a message to the subcontinent that it has the capability for space war.¹ This is clearly aimed at Pakistan as it comes just weeks after Indian airplanes violated the Line of Control to strike inside Pakistan post-Pulwama incident. It also comes less than two weeks ahead of Indian elections that are set to be held on April 11. The test is also aimed at raising Mr. Modi’s electoral popularity.

¹ “Modi declares India a “space superpower” as satellite downed by missile,” The Nation, March 27, 2019.
US and Pakistan have expressed concerns about the ASAT test. Acting US Defense Secretary, Patrick Shanahan expressed concern regarding the space debris such tests create which can harm civilian and military satellites and collide with other space assets. His message for India was, “We all live in space, let us not make it a mess.” He pointed out that we all use space, which should not be made unstable through space debris. He said that tests like this one is why American Space Force is so important. NASA chief Jim Bridenstine called it a “terrible thing” that created 400 pieces of debris that pose dangers to the International Space Station, which is a habitable station in low earth orbit and has been operational since 1998.

Pakistan has also issued a statement against Indian militarization of space. Foreign Ministry issued a statement that, “Space is the common heritage of mankind and every nation has the responsibility to avoid actions which can lead to the militarization of this arena.” India now has the demonstrated capability to destroy other countries’ satellites. This is a threat for Pakistan which has several satellites in orbit as well as for China that has a large space programme. Moreover, India has developed an extensive military space program that gives it space-based reconnaissance, surveillance and communication capabilities that adds a destabilizing element to the military, nuclear and strategic balance in South Asia. Having dedicated military satellites that provide real time intelligence, navigation and communication means that it gives India an edge in any conventional or nuclear conflict. India’s dominance of the fourth medium of warfare thus further threatens to undermine nuclear deterrence between India and Pakistan. India’s acquisition of ASAT capability essentially weaponizes space and is likely to carry the India Pakistan rivalry to a yet higher level. These developments directly threaten Pakistan’s security and strategic stability in South Asia.

The deal for the purchase of five S-400 missile defense systems with a cost of $5.5 billion was inked in October 5, 2018 between Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Minister of State of Defense Subhash Bhamre confirmed in January 2019 that the delivery of all five S-400 regiments was on schedule and expected to be delivered from October 2020 to April 2023. The US is unhappy about the deal and is still considering imposing sanctions on India under the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) which is meant to punish

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3 “Indian Satellite destruction endangered International Space Station: NASA,” The Express Tribune, April 3, 2019

4 “Pakistan urges no militarization of space after India tests anti-satellite missile,” Khaleej Times, March 28, 2019.

countries negotiating significant transactions with Russia. However, India seems undeterred and the US also seems hesitant to sanction its strategic partner.

The S-400 is one of the most advanced air defense systems in the world. It has a 400 km range and can engage and shoot 80 targets simultaneously. It can detect and destroy incoming bombers, airplanes and ballistic missiles. Induction of the S-400 systems would tremendously boost India’s air defense, as well as missile defence capability. India already has its indigenous two-tiered missile defense system comprised of Prithvi Air Defense for high altitude interception and Advanced Air Defense system for lower altitude interception. The system is already operational and can protect two major Indian cities - New Delhi and Mumbai. The S-400 further strengthens India’s missile defense capabilities. This has a direct effect on the nuclear deterrence equation between India and Pakistan. It disturbs deterrence by making India invulnerable to incoming missile attacks. It not only gives India a false sense of security, but also increases its net resolve in a crisis whereby it would be willing to take greater risks in order to prevail in a conflict. The rationale behind it is that even if a crisis escalates and enters into the nuclear realm, India would be secure in the knowledge that its missile defense systems would protect against an enemy attack. Even though missile defense systems are not fool proof and may only provide partial protection, they are destabilizing since they give a false sense of security to Indian decision makers.


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Indian development of its naval leg of the nuclear triad is also threatening security in the Indian Ocean. India commissioned its first nuclear powered missile carrying submarine (SSBN) INS Arihant in 2016. The second one INS Arighat was launched in November 2017. It is equipped to carry K-15 missiles with 750 km range and K-4 missiles. Its missile inventory also includes nuclear capable Brahmos cruise missile and nuclear capable Dhanush. It is also planning to induct six nuclear powered attack submarines (SSN) in the next 15 years. This essentially gives India a second-strike capability. Moreover, the US has approved the sale of 24 MH-60 R helicopters to India worth $2.6 billion. The US State Departments said that the deal would support foreign policy and national security of the US by improving the “security of a major defensive partner.” This is clearly intended to strengthen India’s offensive power while at the same time building it up as a counterweight to the increasing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean. The sale of helicopters gives India formidable anti-submarine capability. This is a direct threat to Pakistan which is relying on limited number of submarines to achieve a second-strike capability against India. This would undercut Pakistan’s naval nuclear strike capabilities in a conflict.

In addition, rapid nuclearization of the Indian Ocean is also destabilizing for deterrence and strategic stability. India and Pakistan have so far maintained land-based missiles in de-mated condition. However, at sea nuclear weapons have to be mated which leads to the issues of command and control and increases the chances of accidental, as well as unauthorized launch. It also increases arms race tendencies since Pakistan is also developing its submarine fleet and has already tested submarine launched cruise missile (SLCM) Babur 3.

India’s rapid development of military space capabilities and the latest anti-satellite test is a grave security concern for Pakistan, China, and for the international community. Militarization of space is not in the interests of any country. However, India is all set to carry its military and strategic offensive capabilities to space. This, coupled with India’s rapid military modernization, its pursuit of ballistic missile defense capabilities, systems like the S-400, and anti-submarine capability, which pave the path to India’s great power status would further increase Indian aggressive tendencies like the post-Pulwama incident. This bodes ill for the peace and security of the region. International community needs to take note of these developments. In the realm of space especially, there is need to negotiate solid arms control treaties which would prevent the militarization of space.

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