

INDIA'S "ACCIDENTAL" MISSILE LAUNCH: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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July 6, 2022

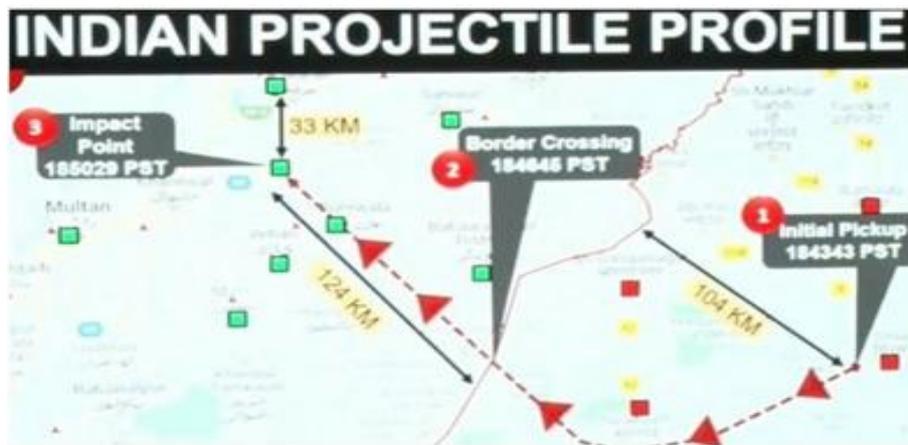
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On March 9, 2022, an Indian missile flying at supersonic speed landed near Mian Channu, in the Pakistani province of Punjab. It was a BrahMos cruise missile, which flew a total of 6 minutes and 46 seconds, out of which 3 minutes and 46 seconds was inside Pakistani airspace (124km). Pakistan exercised restraint and did not retaliate. However, it took India almost two days to acknowledge that a missile had been fired due to a technical malfunction while the international community did not show any reaction to the incident. The incident might have passed as insignificant. However, it is of great significance since this is the first-ever accidental launch between two nuclear-armed adversaries. It raises several questions regarding India's intentions, its technical expertise and its nuclear command and control. Pakistan also needs to take a deeper look into what it means. The possibility cannot be overlooked that this could very well have been a deliberately launched, nuclear-armed missile launch. What would have been Pakistan's options in that case? Or if it was a failure of command and control on the part of India, what could have been Pakistan's response. If it was a technical malfunction then what are its implications for Pakistan.

There is a huge question mark over whether this was an accidental or deliberate missile launch. Whatever the case may be, it is problematic in both cases. If it was an accidental launch then it

raises concerns over the Indian command and control system. India needs to probe into what happened. Pakistan asked India to conduct a joint investigation of the incident. However, so far India has not taken up the offer for a joint investigation. India initially claimed to take the incident seriously and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh while speaking to the parliament said that “the government has taken serious note of the incident. A formal high-level inquiry has been ordered.”¹ He claimed that operations, maintenance and inspections are conducted following a set of standard operating procedures. “Any laxity found in the safety and security of our weapons systems will be dealt with immediately. Our missile system is extremely trustworthy and secure.”² Indian initially claimed that the incident happened during routine maintenance and after the initial investigation has claimed that it was due to a human error and points towards a Group Captain rank officer for firing the missile during routine maintenance. There has been no transparency or information sharing on the issue. This is problematic. While many missile accidents happened during the Cold War, this was the first instance when a missile launch took place from one nuclear-armed state to the territory of another. According to one expert, while accidental launches do happen during military exercises, such incidents are less likely to happen during routine maintenance,³ as India claimed. Moreover, there are many physical safeguards to prevent an accidental launch. The trajectory of the missile launch was also such that it first travelled within Indian territory and then took a ninety-degree turn. India’s nuclear safety and security apparatus have always been shrouded in mystery. Eminent analysts like Christopher Clary argue that India’s opacity about safety and security issues was inconsistent with its nuclear-weapons status and its great-power aspirations. “Closed organisations develop pathologies that are often harmful to the broader public interest.”⁴



1 “Accidental Missile Firing Case: Probe Points towards Group Captain,” *Business Today*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/story/accidental-missile-firing-case-probe-points-towards-group-captain-327000-2022-03-23>

2 Ibid.

3 Christopher Clary “The Curious Case of the Accidental Indian Missile Launch,” *War on the Rocks*, March 17, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-curious-case-of-the-accidental-indian-missile-launch/>

4 Ibid.

Another disturbing aspect of the incident was a 48-hour delay in any Indian acknowledgement of the incident or communication with Pakistan. There is an army-to-army hotline that is not used. This is not only very dangerous because Pakistan may well have responded to the launch believing it was armed but this also contravenes Indian obligations under a 1991 agreement with Pakistan on preventing air space violations which state that both sides are obligated that "if any inadvertent [airspace] violation does take place, the incident will be promptly investigated and the Headquarters (HQ) of the other Air Force informed of the results without delay, through diplomatic channels."

Article I of the agreement states that if an air violation occurs investigation will be carried out and the other side informed of the results without delay through diplomatic channels. Article V of the agreement also states that in emergencies or the event of air violation "authorities designated by the respective governments should contact each other by the quickest means of communications available."⁶

International response to the incident was also muted and pretty much accepted the Indian narrative. State Department spokesperson "We have no indication, as you also heard from our Indian partners, that this incident was anything other than an accident."⁷ This has to be understood in the larger context where India is central to the US strategy to counterbalance China. The growing strategic partnership with India, which includes sharing of defence hardware and technology among other things, is part of this larger strategy to contain China. The US and Western countries have turned a blind eye towards Indian misadventures and its human rights violations in Kashmir. In the last few decades, there have been dozens of incidents of uranium theft and an illegal market for radioactive substances in India. However, the world has closed its eyes to these incidents that are a danger within but also a hazard to its neighbours. Moreover, India is a huge lucrative economic market as well, whereby everyone wants to do business with India. This naturally insulates India from any criticism over its misadventure or transgressions.

If this was indeed an accidental launch, then India needs to look into its command and control systems and adopt fail-safe launch protocols because a nuclear South Asia cannot afford missile launches – inadvertent or deliberate. If this was not an accidental launch then what could be Indian motives? It may have been an attempt to test Pakistan's deterrence capability and its resolve to

⁵ "Agreement between India and Pakistan on Prevention of Air Space Violation and for Permitting over Flights and Landings by Military Aircraft," April 6, 1991, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%201843/volume-1843-i-31419-english.pdf>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "No Indication Indian Missile Launch anything other than an Accident: US," *The Express Tribune*, March 15, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2348056/no-indication-indian-missile-launch-anything-other-than-an-accident-us>

respond to missile launches. India has been interested in finding and exploiting loopholes in Pakistan's full spectrum deterrence. India has long been trying to find space for limited nuclear war under Pakistan's nuclear threshold. India has been endeavouring to improve its first-strike capability against Pakistan to eliminate as many weapons as possible in its first strike and then absorb any remaining missiles launched through its missile defence capabilities. It is, thus, developing precision strike missiles and weaponry like hypersonic missiles. India's weapons developments, acquisitions and doctrines are all aimed at maintaining escalation dominance. It is moving away from a doctrine of No First Use (NFU) to first use, which ties in with its first-strike tendencies.

The incident might be significant in a larger contest. To understand dynamics in South Asia, there is a need to look at the bigger picture. India is moving towards increasing the readiness of its nuclear forces. It has canisterised its warheads that can be stored easily and can be mated with weapons at short notice. This is a new feature of India's Strategic Forces Command's increased emphasis on readiness. In recent years, former senior civilian and military officials have indicated that "some portion of India's nuclear force, particularly those weapons and capabilities designed for use against Pakistan, are now kept at a high state of readiness, capable of being operationalised and released within seconds or minutes in a crisis - not hours, as had been assumed."⁸ This confirms the Indian move away from NFU towards pre-emption. However, such doctrinal and force posture changes by India would bring more instability to South Asia. It may also push Pakistan to also increase the readiness of its forces. This increases the likelihood of nuclear use in the region increasing the misperception, unauthorised and accidental launch. It essentially makes South Asia a very dangerous place.

So what are the takeaways from the incident and possible policy options? The missile launch incident and India's poor response have serious implications for crisis stability and nuclear deterrence. The incident is significant because it may have hit the many civilian flights that were in the air at the time of the missile launch. It is also significant because with no communications over the incident by India Pakistan air forces suspended all military and civilian aircraft for nearly six hours and reportedly placed frontline bases and strike aircraft on high alert. This could have easily escalated to a conflict with possibly disastrous consequences.

India needs to conduct a transparent investigation of the incident and inform Pakistan at the earliest. India also needs to take measures to ensure that such incidents do not take place in future. Both India and Pakistan need to negotiate some Confidence Building Measures. The proposal for a

⁸ Matt Korda, "Flying Under The Radar: A Missile Accident in South Asia," Federation of American Scientists, April 4, 2022, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2022/04/flying-under-the-radar-a-missile-accident-in-south-asia/>

hotline for nuclear-related issues has been on the table for almost two decades. This must be negotiated before the region faces the next crisis. The two countries already have a ballistic-missile flight test pre-notification agreement, cruise missiles can be added to this. However, above all India needs to address questions about its safety and security procedures and adopt transparency towards command and control protocols. Nuclear restraint regime must be negotiated. South Asia may well be standing at the cusp of the next crisis – it may not be so lucky next time. India and Pakistan must act now because nuclear wars are unthinkable, and must never be fought.