

Agni-V set to be inducted by December after one more test

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By Shishir Gupta

Agni-V, India's long-range ballistic missile with a range of 5,000-5,500km will undergo one more pre-induction test, perhaps as soon as October, and be inducted into the country's strategic arsenal shortly after, before the end of the year, senior defence ministry officials said on condition of anonymity.

The missile, which completes India's missile portfolio, underwent its penultimate pre-induction test in June and was expected to be inducted by next year. It is being built by the Defence Research Development Organisation's (DRDO) Advanced Systems Laboratory and it was assumed that the production for deployment would start after the final test.

The missile will be inducted into the Strategic Forces Command for deployment; strategic missiles, Agni 1 to 4, with ranges from 700 km to 3,500 km, have already been deployed by the Strategic Forces Command, which controls India's ballistic missile arsenal. SFC is also expected to test the missiles after induction.

The Agni-V is widely seen as a nuclear deterrent; with its range, it can reach destinations in China.

While India's submarine-launched missile programme is well on track with ranges up to 3,000km, DRDO's Agni missile series provides adequate riposte to any first use nuclear threat posed by the adversary. According to top officials, the Indian missile programme is head and shoulders above the programme of Pakistan, which has missiles with ranges limited to 2,800km based on acquired technology. In an earlier interview with Hindustan Times, India's defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman had spoken about the success of the country's missile programme. "In missile and missile-related matters, we have progressed so much that today we are the envy of so many countries. We are also scaling up production of those," she said.

According to defence ministry officials, DRDO had made significant progress in India's non-strategic missile programme with the potential of indigenously developing all missiles required by Indian armed forces within the next four years. DRDO has already developed radio frequency seeker technology in the past one-and-a-half years and is currently testing this on the Akash surface-to-air missile and the Astra beyond visual range air-to-air missile. The next generation Akash missile will have a seeker in place of a radio proximity fuse to guide the weapon to the target. "We will be saving nothing less than R50,000 crore in missile imports within four years as all the armed forces requirements from anti-tank guided missile to medium range surface to air missile will be manufactured in India," said one of the officials, who asked not to be identified.

Although the non-strategic missile arsenal will be enhanced in the coming years, the officials added, the strategic missile arsenal will be capped for the present with the Agni-V, with no successor or next series on the horizon or even on the drawing board. "It is for the government to decide on the missile platform ranges after considering the strategic environment and global threats," added another official.

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