

Implications of India's Nirbhay Missile test - Pak writer

India has always exhibited hegemonic tendencies and sought to dominate the South Asian region. It also entertains ambitions to become one of the major powers in the region and beyond. Driven by its designs for regional and global hegemony, India has set up several missile development programmes. On April 15, it carried out a successful test of its indigenously developed long range subsonic stealth cruise missile Nirbhay which is capable of reaching its target with a speed of 864.36 kilometres per hour flying at an altitude of 100 metres.

The Nirbhay has been developed by the Defence Research and Development Organization of India. Its operational range is 1,000 kilometres and it is guided by an indigenously developed advanced inertial navigation system. The INS allows Nirbhay to be fairly accurate.

The missile is designed to carry nuclear or conventional warheads of 300 kilogram to 400 kilogram. According to the Indian Ministry of Defence, the test was conducted to prove the repeatability of both the boost phase and the cruise phase using way point navigation at very low altitudes.

It was reported to have hit the designated target following 42 minutes and 23 seconds in flight. Nirbhay can be launched from diverse platforms including aircraft, ground-based vehicles or launchers, ships and submarines. The DRDO is on course to test an air-launched version of Nirbhay in 2 to 3 years.

Nirbhay missiles can fly at various altitudes, mostly ranging from 500 metres to 4 kilometres above the ground. The low altitude flight reduces the chances of detection by the adversary radar system. The cruise missile comes with a loitering ability which means that it can go around a target and perform several maneuvers before re-engaging the target. In other words, once the missile is above the target and put on a 'loiter' pattern, the launch in charge can decide to strike or allow it to self-destruct.

The missile has the capability to enter deep into adversary territory area and engage targets with high precision. The April test is the second successful flight of Nirbhay since November 2017. India started the Nirbhay programme in 2004. It was initially meant to be completed in 2016 but some technological issues (flight control software and navigation system) delayed the project. Before the 2017 test, there were four unsuccessful trials. India can use Nirbhay to target military targets in enemy territory with little collateral damage.

An important aspect of the test is its timing. The trial comes in an environment of high tensions between India and Pakistan. Polling in the general elections is already under way. Preemption is a core element of Indian joint armed forces doctrine of 2017 and land warfare doctrine of 2018. The Nirbhay missile allows for the possibility of a limited war with Pakistan. Pakistan's subsonic cruise missile, Babur, is compatible with Nirbhay.

The test has aggravated the crisis between the two nuclear armed states. It is the latest in a series of weapon development projects including anti-satellite ballistic missile, Electronic Management Intelligence Satellite and the Dhanush artillery gun. These developments point to an Indian bid to further escalate the military tensions with Pakistan.

Meanwhile the Indian political elite led by Prime Minister Modi is trying to exploit hatred against Pakistan for electoral gain. The test also indicates that India is trying to enhance its first strike capability vis-à-vis Pakistan thus abandoning the 'no first use' policy.

In the South Asian context, the rivalry between India and Pakistan has played a crucial role in shaping security dynamics of the region. Pakistan's major security threats emerge from India.

Its nuclear weapons and missile programmes are meant to provide deterrence against India. Nirbhay can destabilize the strategic equilibrium in South Asia and be a hurdle to any peace initiative in the region. Such developments can trigger a cruise missiles race between India and Pakistan.

<http://www.defencenews.in/article/Implications-of-India%E2%80%99s-Nirbhay-Missile-Test---Pak-Writer-584814>