



India's Vertical Proliferation and ICBM Trajectory:

FROM REGIONAL DETERRENT TO GLOBAL THREAT

CISS | CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

CISS Strategic Assessment - August 2026 | India's Vertical Proliferation and ICBM Trajectory: From Regional Deterrent to Global Threat

Patron-in-Chief

Ambassador Ali Sarwar Naqvi, Executive Director, CISS

Supervised & Edited by

Dr Bilal Zubair, Director Research, CISS

Compiled by

Maryyum Masood, Research Officer, CISS

Authors

Maryyum Masood, Research Officer, CISS

Muhammad Ali Baig, Research Officer, CISS

Murad Ali, Research Officer, CISS

Designed by

Zahra Sadiq, Media Assistant, CISS

The Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS) Islamabad conducts original policy research, analyses, and strategic outreach and aims to highlight evolving regional and global strategic issues to promote peace and stability.

@CISS 2026

All rights reserved.

www.ciiss.org.pk

**India's Vertical Proliferation
and ICBM Trajectory:
From Regional Deterrent to
Global Threat**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
----	-------------------

02	INDIA'S MISSILE CAPABILITIES VS. STRATEGIC NEED
----	---

03	INDIA'S STATED RATIONALE VS. OBSERVED TRAJECTORY
----	--

04	FROM REGIONAL DETERRENT TO GLOBAL REACH
----	---

05	THE LEGAL DIMENSION
----	---------------------

06	CONCLUDING SUMMARY
----	--------------------

07	REFERENCES
----	------------

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In mid-2026, two developments occurred to alter the terms on which India's nuclear programme could be assessed. First, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) announced technical readiness to begin full-scale development of the Agni-VI, a four-stage, MIRV-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) with a projected range of 10,000-12,000 kilometres. Second, the SIPRI Yearbook 2026 reported, for the first time in the history of India's nuclear programme that a portion of its arsenal is operationally deployed with twelve warheads carried to sea aboard its ballistic missile submarine fleet. Also, the total stockpile rose from an estimated 180 warheads in 2025 to 190 warheads in 2026.

Together, these developments marked a departure from the framework under which India's programme has been perceived for two decades i.e., a regionally bound deterrent, held in de-mated storage, against Pakistan and China. However, the two developments that occurred belied this perception.

This assessment examines what that departure means for global security, credibility of the global non-proliferation order, and Western security establishments that continue to read India's arsenal through a purely regional lens.

India's declared doctrine no longer explains its capability trajectory. India's official posture rests on credible minimum deterrence (CMD), No First Use (NFU), and a two-adversary frame directed at Pakistan and China. By that doctrine's own logic, the requirement was met when the MIRV-capable Agni-V with a 7,000-8,000 km range covering all of China and Pakistan, was tested and inducted. The Agni-VI's projected reach extends well beyond both adversaries, into Western Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the eastern seaboard of North America. No regional threat justified this step; and the extension is contrary to India's own stated deterrence rationale.

The arsenal is growing not only in size but in readiness. The shift of twelve warheads from storage to live deployment aboard Arihant-class submarines ends the long-standing separation of warheads from delivery systems that characterized India's posture since 1998. This is not only a change in what India can build; it is a change of intention of what India is willing to keep ready. Reach and readiness are expanding simultaneously - the range of the arsenal and the speed with which it can be used.

The triad is maturing along every leg at once. The commissioning of INS Aridhaman, India's third SSBN, alongside the K-4 (~3,500 km) and developmental K-5 (~5,000–6,000 km) submarine-launched missiles, already provides an assured, survivable second-strike capability independent of any land-based system. Because the sea-based leg alone satisfies the second-strike requirement, the parallel pursuit of a land-based ICBM, MIRV payloads, and hypersonic glide vehicles is harder to reconcile with minimum deterrence. The composite picture points toward a counterforce, warfighting posture. MIRV-equipped systems are designed to saturate defenses and hold multiple hardened targets at risk.

Combined with post-2019 official ambiguity over the NFU commitment, they indicate a transition from a counter-value, second-strike deterrent toward a counterforce-capable posture. That transition is now extending to intercontinental range.

The non-proliferation architecture is structurally blind to this pathway. The Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) polices the transfer of missile technology between states but contains no mechanism addressing a member state's internal accumulation of the same capability. It is precisely the route India's overlapping civilian space and military missile programmes have followed. Meanwhile, regionally confined programmes outside the regime face sustained sanctions and technology denial, while a globally reaching programme inside it draws little scrutiny.

The deployment shift compounds the problem. Moving warheads to operational status runs directly against the disarmament trajectory the NPT's Article VI is meant to encourage, undertaken by a state outside the treaty altogether and at no diplomatic cost.

The implications are global, not regional. The Agni-VI does not represent the upgrade of a regional deterrent but the construction of an intercontinental strike architecture whose declaratory justification has not kept pace with its reach. Western policymakers assessing India's programme solely through the frame of South Asian deterrence dynamics, are measuring a capability that has already outgrown that frame. At the same time, it is becoming operational. The assessment concludes that this gap between doctrine and trajectory carries consequences for global stability and for the uniform application of non-proliferation norms. It warrants attention from the West before the capability renders its own security within range.

2. INDIA'S MISSILE CAPABILITIES VS. STRATEGIC NEED

India's DRDO has announced that it is technically ready to start full scale development of its new inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) Agni-VI, which is expected to have an operational range of 10,000-12,000 kilometers.^[1] This has brought one of the most significant debates in South Asian strategic studies to the fore:^[2] Is India's missile portfolio a true representation of its deterrence needs or an extension of its aspirations? The purpose of this strategic assessment is to look at that question with analytical detachment, fitting capability against doctrine, and reach against requirement.

It is important to gauge India's missile development programme against its declared strategic requirements and to do so, it is necessary to first understand the nature of these requirements. India announced a formal NFU nuclear doctrine,^[3] based on "credible minimum deterrence" and a guarantee of "a devastating second strike."^[4] Consequently, India's deterrence needs are geographically limited because of its Pakistan and China orientation.

For Pakistan, 2000 kilometers of maximum range is required whereas, 5000 kilometers range is required to cover mainland China.

India's Agni-V, which has been tested with a range of 7,000-8,000 kilometers,^[5] can already strike Beijing, Shanghai and all key Chinese cities, and offers what Indian military experts call "credible deterrence" against the Chinese northern neighbor. On this premise, by India's own declared doctrine, Agni-V is sufficient.

India’s existing and future missile strength compared to its two key rivals:

Missile	Range (km)	Primary Target Coverage	MIRV Capable
Agni-I ^[6]	700–1,200	Pakistan (depth)	No
Agni-II ^[7]	2,000–3,500	Pakistan + China	No
Agni-III ^[8]	3,000–3,500	China (partial)	No
Agni-IV ^[9]	3,000–4,000	China (partial)	No
Agni-V ^[10]	7,000–8,000	All of China	Yes (tested in 2024)
Agni-VI ^[11] (proposed)	10,000–12,000	Europe, Africa, Americas	Yes (anticipated)

The above table shows that Agni-V bridges the deterrence gap between India and China. Agni-VI, on the other hand, can take the Indian strategic reach deep into Europe and far towards North America. Agni-VI is likely to be a four-stage solid propellant ICBM having an operational range of 10,000 to 12,000 kilometres.^[12] This goes contrary to Indian declaration of threats from Pakistan and China. Thus, the missile is in a strategic space in which there is no justification from India's own doctrine.

The MIRV Dimension

The question of range is not the only worry. India's successful MIRV test in May 2026 has effectively tested an upgraded variant of Agni-V with 6-8 independently targetable warheads,^[13] which would increase the country's strike capacity without increasing the missile count and make interception more difficult. The introduction of MIRV on Agni-V is helping India move towards a warfighting posture rather than a credible minimum deterrent. If a state is pursuing ICBMs of 12,000 kilometres' range and simultaneously working on MIRV-equipped missiles, then the obvious conclusion is that it is pursuing a counterforce first-strike capability, with global reach.

The precise medium-range nuclear capable assets like the Agni-P which is a rail-based launching missile, already have limited warning time and have hardened storage sites, corps level command nodes and strategic communication infrastructure at risk. Since rail tracks are all around the country, it makes the range of Agni-P flexible.

Even if India could reconfigure some of its nuclear medium-range ballistic missiles for conventional strike roles,^[14] it becomes a serious threat to international peace and security. Agni-VI brings a global element to this counterforce posture that cannot be credibly linked to any regional threats. It is already under discussion among scholars, experts and practitioners that there is no need for India to introduce ICBMs in the region.^[15]

The Deployment Dimension

Range is not the only front where India's arsenal is progressing. What can be seen in India's warheads is the same pattern that has been driving the Agni series towards inter-continental range. The current Indian nuclear arsenal is around 190 warheads, compared to 180 the previous year.

Twelve of these have been deployed, mounted with a delivery system and are now operational for the first time throughout the history of India's nuclear programme.^[16] Until this year, every warhead India has ever made was in storage, apart from the missiles and submarines which would carry it. This separation is coming to an end.

Change is also taking place at sea. A part of its arsenal has been shifted from depots ashore to the sea-based leg of India's nuclear triad, the Arihant-class submarines, which are on deterrence patrol with live warheads. It is not a change in what India can build; it is a change in what India is willing to keep ready.

A warhead on a patrolling submarine is a choice to take the operational risks of having a live weapon at sea, in exchange for the strategic value of an undetected, second-strike capable force that can keep targets at risk at all times, not just through a mating process triggered during a crisis. The development of the Agni-VI demonstrates India's progress toward developing a reach beyond the requirement of the doctrine of two adversaries.^[17]

The deployment shift indicates India is also preparing to go beyond a second-strike posture. A state that is only looking to deter Pakistan and China does not need warheads constantly attached to submarines on patrol, or missiles that can reach Europe and North America. In both cases, infrastructure is being developed that extends beyond the stated deterrence rationale to encompass sustained global power projection. Combined, the two trends represent the same player going on two fronts: increasing the range of its weapons and decreasing the time it takes to use its currently deployed weapons.^[18]

3. INDIA’S STATED RATIONALE VS. OBSERVED TRAJECTORY

India’s official stance remains on the principle of CMD^[19] and not numerical parity with major nuclear weapons states, claiming that with MIRV capability, India can derive much more strategic value from a limited missile arsenal.^[20] Indian strategic commentators also note that the Agni series merely keeps China’s nuclear modernization program in check. Whereas, the course of the Indian programme is increasingly at odds with this narrative.

India’s commitment to NFU has lost credibility in the post-2019 political discourse as New Delhi proceeds to develop MIRV capabilities, commission its second nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine and operationalize platforms such as Rafale-class aircraft and the Agni-V.^[21] The loss of credibility of the NFU and the acquisition of global reach ICBMs produce a composite strategic picture that goes beyond the China deterrence argument.

Strategic Requirement	Range Needed	Missile Available	Assessment
Cover all targets in Pakistan	~2,000 km	Agni-I, II, III, P	Covered multiple times over
Cover all targets in China	~5,000 km	Agni-V (5,000–8,000 km)	Fully covered
Cover Europe/ Americas	~10,000–12,000 km	Agni-VI (proposed)	No declared regional threat justifies this

The strategic mathematics here is stern and at the very least deserves more attention than it has received on the policy agenda of the West.^[22] India is also moving forward on five fronts of strategic capability i.e., global-range ICBMs that are pushing towards 12,000 km; MIRV payloads that are designed to overwhelm any regional missile defense architecture; a maturing nuclear triad with submarine-launched ballistic missiles extending to 5,000 km from sea-based platforms; hypersonic glide vehicles that are heading towards trial phase; and an accelerating indigenous defense industrial base that is pushing down reliance on foreign supply chains for all of the above.^[23] They together form a strategic posture which is more ambitious than what two regional foes would conventionally require for deterrence.^[24]

The sea-based aspect is also important and it is frequently overlooked in purely land-based assessments that pay attention only to the Agni series. The submarine-launched ballistic missile programme has made significant strides in India and has become a viable component of the country's nuclear triad. The K-15 (Sagarika) with a range of about 750 km^[25] offers a second-strike capability near the coast.

The K-4, which has been tested several times,^[26] can reach 3,500 kilometres,^[27] bringing almost all of Pakistan's territory and a significant part of the eastern seaboard of China within the range from the Bay of Bengal, without any land-based platform being activated.

The K-5, which is said to be in advanced development, is expected to reach a range of 5,000-6000 kilometers,^[28] matching Agni-V's continental range, while being inherently mobile, concealed and pre-emption-proof. Earlier this year, India deployed its third nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine INS Aridhaman (S4),^[29] thus building an at-sea deterrent which would be difficult to neutralize by any regional adversary in a credible first-strike scenario. Measured by any yardstick of sufficiency of second-strike capability, the sea-based leg does meet the requirement of deterrence entirely, and the simultaneous development of land-based ICBMs with inter-continental range becomes a strategic option that calls for justification beyond the minimum deterrence concept.^[30]

A comprehensive mapping of India's current and projected capabilities produces a picture whose scope and ambition sit in considerable tension with the minimum deterrence rationale that India's official doctrine advances.

Capability Domain	System	Range / Status	Remarks
Land-based ballistic missile	Agni-V	5,000–8,000 km	MIRV tested; operationally deployed
Land-based ICBM (proposed)	Agni-VI	10,000–12,000 km	DRDO ready; government clearance pending
SLBM (near-range)	K-15 Sagarika	~750 km	Deployed on INS Arihant / Arighat
SLBM (medium-range)	K-4	~3,500 km	Tested; under induction
SLBM (long-range)	K-5	~5,000 km	Under development
Hypersonic glide vehicle	DRDO HGV	Classified	Advanced trials phase
Hypersonic cruise missile	Scramjet-powered	Classified	Parallel development track

Against this, the expanding arsenal presents a structurally different picture:

Capability	India	Pakistan
Maximum land-based range	5,000–8,000 km (Agni-V); 10,000–12,000 km proposed	~2,750 km (Shaheen-III)
SLBM capability	Operational (K-15, K-4); K-5 in development	None operational
MIRV capability	Tested (March 2024; August 2025)	Under development
Nuclear triad	Land + Sea (SSBN) + Air	Land + Air
Hypersonic programme	Advanced (trials imminent)	Early stage
No First Use declared	Yes (credibility increasingly questioned)	Full-spectrum deterrence
Deployed warhead status	12 warheads deployed at sea (SSBN); 178 in storage ^[31]	None deployed - entire arsenal in storage

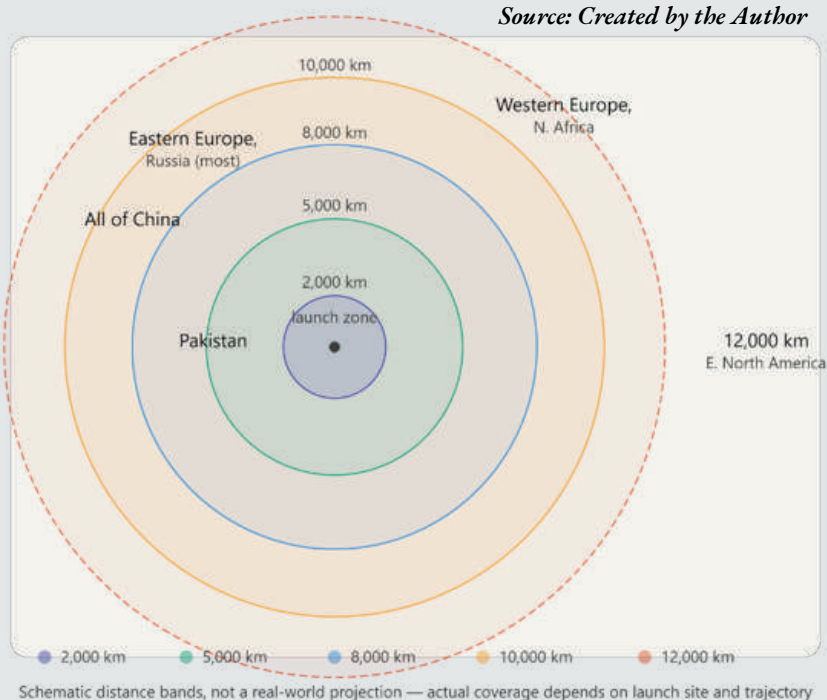
This comparison does not simply indicate a 'capability gap,' it evidences a qualitative and structural difference which is more difficult to disregard on that basis alone. One state's (Pakistan) strategic arsenal is indicative of a deterrence posture that is purposefully and deliberately restricted to the regional theatre; the maximum range of its longest-range delivery system is about 2,750 kilometers with zero deployed warheads, which can hold the next-door enemy at bay, but has no real consequence beyond the region. The other state's (India) current and developing inventory projects (with twelve deployed warheads) strategic coverage across two continents, and a third coming into range upon Agni-VI's induction - a reach further consolidated by submarine-based platforms that no regional adversary currently possesses the means to credibly threaten. That combination of a global land-based posture, maturing survivability at sea, MIRV saturation and hypersonic delivery vehicles is a strategic posture whose range is, by any technical definition, global.

4. FROM REGIONAL DETERRENT TO GLOBAL REACH

In the context of geographical dimensions, ICBMs if launched from southern India offers significant advantages. For instance, from southern peninsula, ICBMs with around 12000 kilometers range can smoothly hit targets throughout in Asia, Europe, Africa and most part of North America. The factor of missile ranges depends on its payload and weight, not only on the location it is launched. For instance, Indian missiles like Agni-V with a reported range of 7000-8000 kilometers, can effectively hit a large portion of Europe and the whole part of Asia.

While existing at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, India's geographic position provides favorable ground for ICBM operations. It signals India's shift from a regional power posture to one aimed at global power status and global deterrence.

Source: Created by the Author



The innermost two bands map directly onto India's declared deterrence requirements. The 2,000 kilometers band corresponds to Pakistani depth and has been satisfied by India's missile inventory for decades. The 5,000 kilometers band brings the whole of Chinese territory into range and corresponds to what Agni-V was specifically built to achieve - its successful testing closed the gap between India's two-adversary doctrine and its demonstrated capability. Up to this point, range and declared requirement track each other closely, and there is nothing analytically contested about either band.

At 12,000 kilometers range band, the geometric reach from southern or eastern Indian launch sites extends across most of Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and the eastern seaboard of North America. As discussed earlier in this assessment, India's declared doctrine in relation to the missile programme is based on deterrence against China and Pakistan, where the 5,000 kilometers range is deemed to be sufficient. This assessment has been focused on the extended reach - the 8,000, 10,000, and 12,000 kilometres bands - capability that goes beyond the stated requirement.

According to the familiar language of strategic studies,^[32] states possessing the capability of more than 10,000 kilometers range MIRV-equipped ICBMs are the global powers. A state that builds into that category while continuing to justify its arsenal by reference to two regional adversaries invites the question of whether that justification still describes what the arsenal is for.^[33]

For years, Pakistani strategic assessments have suggested that Indian declaratory restraint and the actual trajectory of capability development are moving in opposite directions, and the Agni-VI is the most recent proof that this is indeed the case. A credible threat assessment does not need a named target list, it needs to show the ability to carry out the attack, a plausible way to use those capabilities and a doctrinal frame of reference that does not rule out that path. India now fulfils all three. The capability itself is unambiguous - the May 2026 test of a MIRV equipped Agni-V, following the March 2024 Mission Divyastra MIRV demonstration, shows the underlying re-entry and guidance technology that the Agni-VI would extend to intercontinental range.^[34]

It is no longer experimental. At this range, a MIRV-equipped ICBM is a long-range strategic weapon to hold multiple hardened targets at risk, not a weapon specially designed for a single strike at a near neighbour.

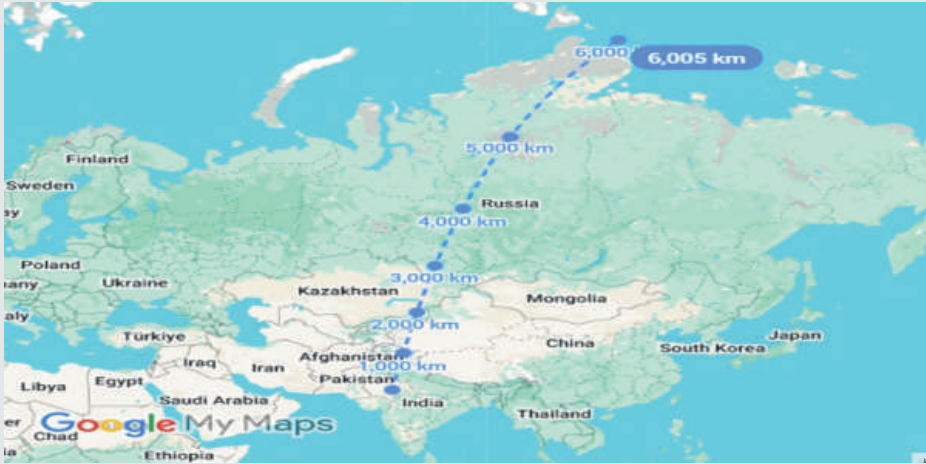
As far as doctrine is concerned, what matters is not that India has officially abandoned the NFU. NFU's credibility as a real operational constraint has visibly been dented since 2019, when Defense Minister Rajnath Singh made it public that "the future adherence" to it "depends on circumstances" - a clear ambiguity that was not a slip. The ambiguity has been accompanied by another parallel change in the technical nature of the arsenal, which is shifting toward MIRV-capable, counterforce-capable systems, designed to saturate adversary defenses and hold time-sensitive targets at risk pre-emptively, rather than simply to ensure a survivable second strike.

Combined, the doctrinal hedge and the counterforce capable hardware are pointing in the same direction: a transition from minimum deterrent to a warfighting posture and now into the intercontinental range as well.

But the biggest indicator of intention is the asymmetry itself. States do not routinely build capability twice the range needed to support their declared doctrine^[35]. Read along with the maturing sea-based leg of the triad, with the Arihant-class submarines and the K-4 and K-5 submarine-launched missiles that extend assured second-strike range on their own, apart from any land-based system; and along with the parallel hypersonic glide vehicle programme, the Agni-VI feels less like a stand-alone technical feat and more like a piece of a deliberate architecture to reach the globe. The following images, taken from Google Maps, show a glimpse of how far New Delhi can reach with Agni VI.

MAP 1

INDIA TO RUSSIA (1,000–6,005 KILOMETERS)



At ranges up to 6,005 Kilometers, a launch from Indian territory reaches due north across Pakistan and Afghanistan, through Kazakhstan and Central Asia, and into Russia as far as its Arctic coast in Siberia, placing the whole of Central Asia, Mongolia, and Russia's entire north-south extent within range.

MAP 2

INDIA TO JAPAN (1,000–6,075 KILOMETERS)



At ranges up to 6,075 kilometers, a launch from Indian territory reaches eastward across Pakistan and Afghanistan at the shortest distances, traverses the full breadth of China by 4,000–5,000 kilometers, and extends to South Korea and Japan by 6,000–6,075 kilometers, placing all of China, the Korean Peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago within range.

MAP 3
INDIA TO ALGERIA/WEST AFRICA (1,000–9,028
KILOMETERS)



At ranges up to 9,028 kilometers, a launch from Indian territory reaches westward across Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq at shorter distances, spans Türkiye and the Arabian Peninsula by the mid-range markers, and extends across the length of North Africa (Algeria, Niger, and Nigeria) by the outer band. This places all of the Middle East, the whole of North Africa, and a significant stretch of West Africa within range.

MAP 4
INDIA TO UNITED KINGDOM (1,000–7,050
KILOMETERS)



At ranges up to 7,050 kilometers, a launch from Indian territory reaches northwest across Pakistan and Iran at shorter distances, spans Türkiye, Ukraine, and Poland by the 4,000–5,000 kilometers markers, and extends to the United Kingdom by the outer band, placing all of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe up to the British Isles within range.

MAP 5

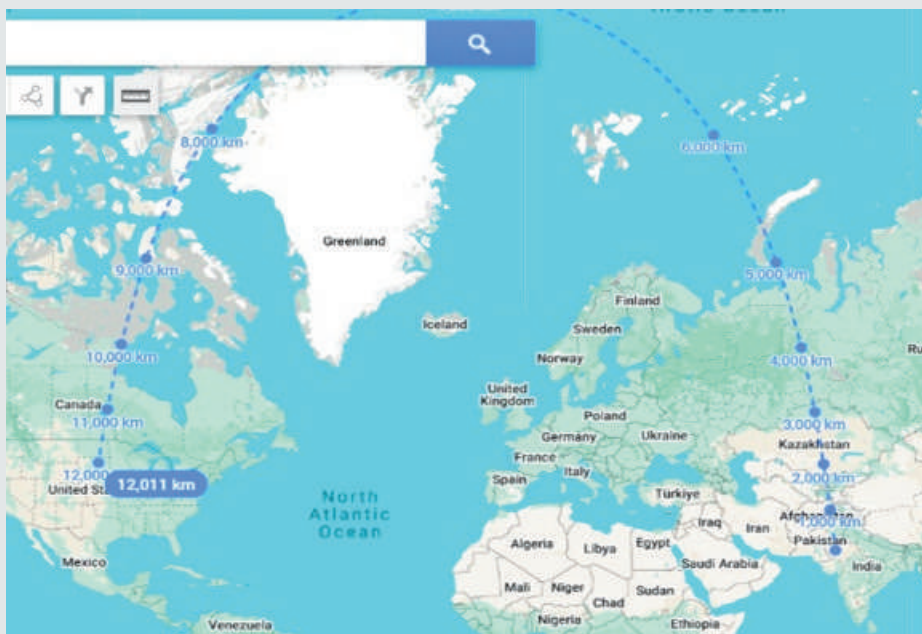
INDIA TO NORTH AMERICA VIA THE ARCTIC (1,000–12,011 KILOMETERS)



At ranges up to 12,011 kilometers, a launch from Indian territory tracks north over Central Asia and Russia at shorter distances, crosses the Arctic near the pole by the 10,000–11,000 kilometers markers, and descends over Canada to reach the continental US by the outer band, placing the eastern seaboard of North America within range via a polar trajectory.

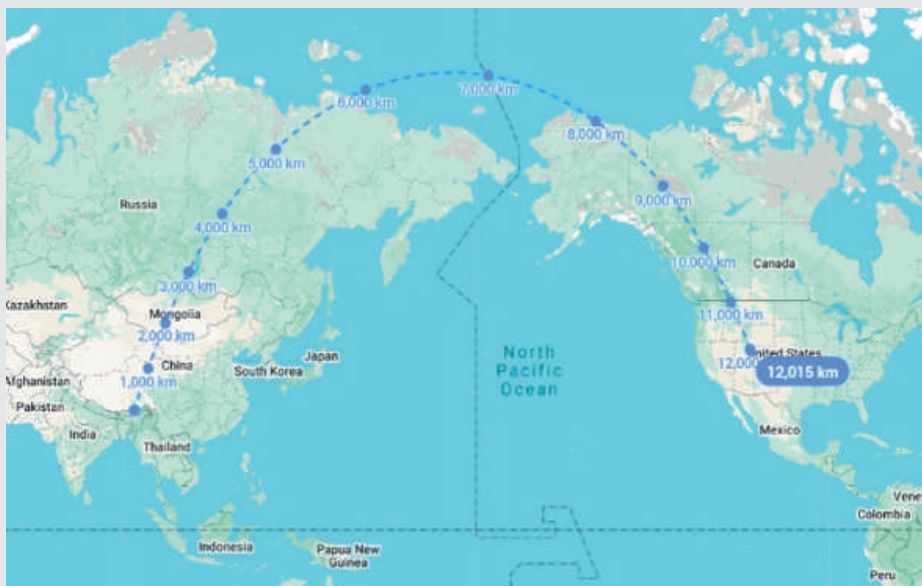
MAP 6

INDIA TO UNITED STATES, CLOSE-UP POLAR VIEW (1,000–12,011 KILOMETERS)



A closer view of the same polar trajectory as Map 5: the path runs from Pakistan and Afghanistan through Kazakhstan and Russia at shorter ranges, crosses over Greenland and the Canadian Arctic by the 8,000–10,000 kilometers markers, and reaches the continental United States by 11,000–12,011 kilometers, confirming that the eastern seaboard of the US falls within range using an over-the-pole flight path rather than a transatlantic one.

MAP 7
INDIA TO UNITED STATES, FULL PACIFIC-POLAR
ARC (1,000–12,015 KILOMETERS)



The widest view of the trans-polar trajectory: the path runs from Pakistan and India across Mongolia and Siberian Russia at shorter ranges, arcs over the North Pacific and the Bering Strait by 7,000–9,000 kilometers, crosses Canada by 10,000–11,000 kilometers, and terminates in the continental United States at the outer 12,015 kilometers band, showing the complete over-the-pole route from Indian territory to North America’s western and central states.

For Western policymakers, the significance of India's development of ICBMs and its operational readiness should not be understated. The Agni-VI's range already places Western Europe and the eastern seaboard of North America inside its geometric reach; the deployment shift means a portion of India's arsenal is no longer sitting in storage awaiting a crisis-driven mating process, but is, for the first time, operationally ready. A Western security establishment that continues to read India's nuclear programme through the lens of South Asian deterrence alone is measuring a capability that has already outgrown that frame, at the exact moment that capability is also becoming operational.^[36]

5. THE LEGAL DIMENSION

NPT's Structural Strain

This is where analysis meets a wider geopolitical query which has, so far, largely not been asked in the policy discourse in the West. The 12,000 kilometers range missile armed with a MIRV warhead puts European capitals in India's target range.

Agni-V's inter-continental capabilities already extend to other distant regions including parts of Europe and Africa, and this would get amplified several times by Agni-VI.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) structure is already under stress because of the US-India civil nuclear deal of 2008,^[37] and now comes the added challenge of a non-signatory country building an ICBM programme that has a global reach but is not subject to any significant international condemnation.

The difference with other regional nuclear programs, which are subject to continuous sanctions and technology denials, despite remaining geographically confined, is enough to raise legitimate doubts about the degree of uniformity in applying non-proliferation norms.

That is a serious drawback to the international arms control regime's credibility.

The deployment shift adds a distinct legal problem. The NPT's Article VI commitment to disarmament, and the broader non-proliferation architecture built around it, points toward reducing reliance on nuclear weapons and walking back operational readiness over time, not increasing it. A state that moves warheads from storage to deployed status for the first time is moving in the opposite direction, independent of anything to do with missile range or delivery systems.

This is not a loophole or an ambiguity in how the treaty regime is written, the way the MTCR gap discussed below is; it is a direct contradiction of the disarmament trajectory the non-proliferation order is meant to encourage, occurring in a state that sits outside the NPT altogether. Left unaddressed, this sets a precedent that any nuclear-armed state outside the treaty framework can advance its operational readiness without triggering the scrutiny, sanctions, or diplomatic cost that the same step

would draw inside it, hollowing out the norm of restraint the non-proliferation order depends on to function at all.

MTCR Norms

India's quest for the Agni-VI does not violate the MTCR, because the rules do not limit the development of a member state, but rather regulate the export and transfer of such weapons. A legal loophole in that deal gives New Delhi the freedom to keep its own missile programme expanding indefinitely beyond its borders, and it also enables the government to claim that its missile trajectory is legally unproblematic while its content becomes increasingly dubious in relation to the original aim of the treaty.

The scope of the MTCR has been put under severe strain, and most obviously by India's use of space-launch-derived parts for the Agni-series first stages. In this case, a regime designed to stop proliferation between states has no means to stop proliferation within a state.

The asymmetry becomes sharper when set against how the broader non-proliferation order treats

comparable programmes outside the MTCR's membership.

India's accession gave its space programme direct benefit, since ISRO gained access to previously restricted high-end technologies for cryogenic engine development, while simultaneously enhancing India's standing as a missile and defence exporter. Membership unlocked drone and missile technology access and export rights that were unavailable to India before.

States outside the regime pursuing comparable, regionally-bound missile programmes face sustained sanctions and technology-denial regimes for far less; a state inside the regime, by contrast, accumulates the technological base for global-range strike capability while remaining nominally in good standing. The net effect is a non-proliferation architecture that polices transfer meticulously while remaining functionally blind to accumulation, a double standard that erodes the MTCR's credibility regardless of whether any single rule has technically been broken.

6. CONCLUDING SUMMARY

The range and payload profile of India's missile program is now far greater than what its own official doctrine mandates. This extension of strategic reach not only threatens regional deterrence equilibrium but also threatens the peace and security of the global community.

Agni-VI - 12,000 kilometers, MIRV-equipped, four-stage ICBM is not a more effective weapon against Islamabad or Beijing, as both have been in range for more than a decade. It is the architecture of a state positioning itself to hold targets at risk across three continents, built and tested under a declaratory framework that has never updated to explain why. Soon it may push towards Indian doctrinal flexibility.

MTCR's silence on Agni-VI does not suggest that the programme fits comfortably under the umbrella of the norms it was created to maintain; it suggests the opposite. The wider scrutiny gap identified by this assessment is the same: a programme which is limited to a regional theatre attracts sustained international attention and sanction, but one which is demonstrably of global reach,

developed by a state which is not part of the NPT, has so far attracted comparatively little attention.

India's missile programme now exceeds what a two-adversary deterrence posture requires by a wide and growing margin. The Agni-VI, once it moves from design to test to induction, will be the clearest confirmation available that India's strategic ambitions have already outgrown the regional framework in which they continue to be officially described, and that the international community's response to that shift has, so far, not kept pace with it.

The extended range shows India building capability beyond declared need; the deployment shift shows India, for the first time, putting part of that capability to deployed status rather than leaving it in storage. Neither needs the other to make the case, but their simultaneity removes any remaining ambiguity. India's posture is not changing along one axis. It is changing along all of them, at the same time, in the same direction: toward a global, ready, counterforce-capable force that has already outgrown the doctrine used to justify it.

7. REFERENCES

- [1] Newsd Staff, "India's Agni-VI ICBM Design Completed, DRDO Waiting for Government Approval," Newsd Defence, May 22, 2026, <https://defence.news.in/india/indias-agni-vi-icbm-design-completed-drdo-waiting-for-government-approval>.
- [2] Jamil, Mazhar. "South Asia in Transition." CISS Insight Journal 13, no. 2 (2025).
- [3] Rehan, Tayyaba. "India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine and Its Impact on the Strategic Stability of South Asia." NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability (2026): 14-26.
- [4] Sajjad, Hajra. "India's Growing Strategic Capabilities and Doctrinal Shift." CISS Insight Journal 10, no. 1 (2022): P66-80.
- [5] Monitoring Desk, "India's Agni MIRV Test Poses Threat to Global Stability, Analysts Warn," Kashmir Media Service, June 3, 2026, <https://kmsnews.org/kms/2026/06/03/indias-agni-mirv-test-poses-threat-to-global-stability-analysts-warn.html>.
- [6] Missile Defense Project, "Agni-I," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/agni-1/>.
- [7] Missile Defense Project, "Agni-II," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/agni-2/>.
- [8] Missile Defense Project, "Agni-III," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/agni-3/>.
- [9] Missile Defense Project, "Agni-IV," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/agni-4/>.
- [10] Monitoring Desk, "India's Agni MIRV Test Poses Threat to Global Stability."
- [11] Newsd Staff, "India's Agni-VI ICBM Design Completed."
- [12] Ibid
- [13] "India's Agni MIRV Test Poses Threat to Global Stability."
- [14] Kristensen, Hans M., Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight. 2024. "Indian Nuclear Weapons, 2024." Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 80 (5): 326–42. doi:10.1080/00963402.2024.2388470
- [15] Kristensen, Hans M., et al. "Indian Nuclear Weapons, 2024."
- [16] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Yearbook 2026 (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2026), pg. 11

- [17] Rehan, Tayyaba. "India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine"
- [18] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Yearbook 2026
- [19] Khan, Zafar. 2017. "India's Ballistic Missile Defense: Implications for South Asian Deterrence Stability." *The Washington Quarterly* 40 (3): 187–202. doi:10.1080/0163660X.2017.1370339.
- [20] Khan, Zafar. 2020. "Conceptualizing India's Evolving Nuclear Strategy under the Essentials of Minimum Deterrence: Limitations and Challenges." *Comparative Strategy* 39 (6): 579–91. doi:10.1080/01495933.2020.1826864.
- [21] KURITA, Masahiro. "Evolutions of the Nuclear Postures of India and Pakistan and Their Implications for South Asian Crisis Dynamics." *Journal of the Asia-Japan Research Institute of Ritsumeikan University* 4 (2022): 55.
- [22] Zubair, Bilal, and Zain Rashid Tarar. "Indian Military Modernization and Its Implications on Strategic Stability in South Asia." *Strategic Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1-22.
- [23] Ashraf, Mubeen. "Strategic Transformations: India's Pursuit Of Counterforce Targeting And Regional Stability." *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 2 (2023): 14.
- [24] Masood, Maryyum, and Prince Muhammad Ali Baig. "Potential Impact Of Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems On Strategic Stability And Nuclear Deterrence In South Asia." *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 2 (2023): 27, https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=CzB0ATQAAAAJ&citation_for_view=CzB0ATQAAAAJ;u5HHmVD_uO8C
- [25] Missile Defense Project, "Sagarika/Shaurya," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 11, 2016, last modified April 23, 2024, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/sagarika-shaurya/>.
- [26] Shivani Sharma. "INS Arighat, India's Second Nuclear-Powered Submarine, Commissioned into Navy." *India Today*. August 29, 2024.
- [27] Masao Dahlgren, "India Test Fires Sub-Launched Ballistic Missile," Missile Threat, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 28, 2020, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/india-test-fires-sub-launched-ballistic-missile-2/>.
- [28] "India Completes Development of K-5 Nuclear Ballistic Missile to Expand Submarine Strike Range," *Army Recognition*, July 3, 2025, <https://www.armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2025/india-completes-development-of-k-5-nuclear-ballistic-missile-to-expand-submarine-strike-range>.
- [29] "Deepening Deterrence: India's Expanding SSBN Capability," *Military Balance* (blog), International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 18, 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2026/05/deepening-deterrence-indias-expanding-ssbn-capability/>.
- [30] Andleeb, Zubaria, Saeed Ahmed, And Muhammad Fahim Khan. "India's Nuclear 'No First Use' policy: Implications Of Potential Revocation." *Institute Of Regional Studies Islamabad* 42, no. 1 (2024): 130-149.
- [31] Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Yearbook 2026

- [32] Akhtar, Nasreen. "Emerging challenges to deterrence stability in South Asia: A Theoretical Analysis." *Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses* 8, no. 2 (2022): 145-162.
- [33] Noor, Sitara. "Strategic Stability in South Asia." *Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2023): 64-94.
- [34] Babar, Summar Iqbal, and Abu Hurairah Abbasi. "Emerging technologies and the threat to South Asian security." *CISS Insight Journal* 11, no. 2 (2023): P40-59.
- [35] Rehan, Tayyaba. "India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine"
- [36] Baig, Prince Muhammad Ali, and Fakhra Alam. "The Evolving Indo-French Defence Cooperation: Implications for Pakistan." *BTNT Journal* 3, no. 2 (2024): 130-157.
- [37] Baig, Prince Muhammad Ali. "The Great Power Competition and the Proliferation Strategy of lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems: A Strategic funneling approach." *BTNT Journal* 5, no. 1 (July 31, 2026): 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.61732/bj.v5i1.271>.

