

India's Rocket Force Takes Off with China in Its Sights

Recent border clashes with China, a missile capability gap, and failing deterrence posture may have prompted the move

By [Gabriel Honrada](#)

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India may have taken steps to build a rocket force amid growing border tensions with China and possibly a failing strategic deterrent posture.

Last week, [Swarajya reported](#) that India was building multi-purpose storage tunnels in border states to store short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) and might soon be acquiring the Pralay tactical ballistic missile.

The source notes that these tunnels would keep India's missile arsenal safe from pre-emptive attack and allow it to mount a quick counterstrike. It also says the Pralay missile could be used against Chinese troop concentrations along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the two countries.

Further, [last week India Today reported](#) that the Indian Ministry of Defense had approved the purchase of 120 Pralay missiles as part of building the Indian Rocket Force (IRF), with these missiles to be deployed in border states.

"The project to create a rocket force has received a boost as the proposal to buy around 120 Pralay ballistic missiles has been cleared by a high-level Defense Ministry meeting," an unnamed government official was quoted as saying.

[The Economic Times describes](#) the Pralay as a solid-fuel quasi-ballistic surface-to-surface missile with a range of 150 to 500 kilometers, difficult to intercept, and able to change direction in midair. It says the Pralay can take out long-range enemy air defense systems, high-value targets, and weapons such as heavy artillery.

The source says the Pralay fills India's tactical ballistic-missile gap, noting that China and Pakistan already have such weapons. It also mentions that Pralay was first developed in 2015 and was successfully tested on December 21 and 22, 2021.

In addition, [The Times of India reported this month](#) that India conducted night tests of its nuclear-capable Agni-V missile amid fresh border tensions with China. The source claims that the Agni-V is one of India's most formidable missiles, sporting a 5,000-kilometer range capable of hitting the northernmost parts of China.

Clashes reported

These developments come after fresh border clashes between China and India in the Himalayas. Last week, [The Indian Express reported](#) that on December 9, 70 to 80 Indian troops repelled an incursion by 300 Chinese soldiers after a few hours of hand-to-hand fighting at Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, at the LAC, with soldiers from both sides sustaining some injuries.

The source says such incursions show that China is unilaterally attempting to change the border status quo. It also mentions previous forays, such as the 2020 Galwan clashes, which left 20 Indian soldiers dead, and a similar incident in 2016 where 250 Chinese soldiers crossed the area, but no clashes were reported.

The idea of creating an Indian rocket force has been discussed in the country's defense circles. [However, in a November 2021 article in The Diplomat](#), Saurav Jha wrote that the military asymmetry between China and India was the primary driver for the latter to establish a rocket force.

Specifically, Jha cited former Indian Army chief of staff General Manoj Mukund Naravane, who said future military conflicts would follow a "reverse linearity" conduct of operations, with rear facilities such as command and control posts, logistics hubs, airfields, and communication nodes taking the first salvo from precision standoff weapons.

Naravane, as cited by Jha, then said the second salvo of autonomous drones would aim to overwhelm and destroy air defenses, artillery pieces, missile bases, and tank formations, while rocket and gun artillery attacks finished off troops at forward-deployed localities.

Naravane also mentioned lessons learned from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, noting that concentrating forces increases vulnerability to long-range precision fires, thus the need to concentrate fire rather than platforms.

Given Naravane's ideas, Jha wrote that the Indian Army might not be able to rely on air support in the opening phase of a future conflict and that precision standoff weapons would be vital to enabling offensive and defensive air operations.

He also said establishing the IRF would signal that the country's use of surface-to-surface missiles with mass and precision in a limited war in "non-contact" warfare in a joint force environment.

Yet another reason for India's plans to establish a rocket force is that its deterrence posture against China is failing.

[In a Foreign Policy article this month](#), Sushant Singh wrote that India's economic

entanglement with China, lack of diplomatic reaction to China's incursions in the Himalayas, participation in China-led multilateral summits, and participation in China-led military exercises may show India's inability to act decisively against China.

Singh also said India's desire to be part of the Global South and have a seat at the Global North's table has constrained its freedom of maneuver to deal with its long-standing disputes with China. He said this foreign-policy prism has precluded India from committing to the US-led Quad alliance. Still, the recent border clashes with China may force India to take more decisive steps.

Regarding IRF requirements, [a November 2021 article](#) in India Defense Research Wing (IDRW) says it will require 50,000 to 70,000 personnel and three or four ballistic-missile brigades independently deployed in the country's eastern and western regions.



File photo of the Prithvi missile. Photo: AFP / HO / Indian Ministry of Defense

However, the source also mentions that India has a low rate of ballistic-missile production, with the 1980s-vintage Prithvi SRBM being its mainstay and being designed to deliver nuclear warheads rather than for tactical use.

The source says India has yet to adopt road-mobile tactical ballistic missiles fully, with only limited Shaurya and Prahaar missiles. Establishing the IRF will require vast numbers of these missiles. It also says that while India has the Brahmos supersonic cruise and hypersonic missiles in the works, these weapons are too expensive to deploy in large numbers.

In addition, the jury is split when it comes to establishing an Indian rocket force.

[In a 2020 article for the Center for Land Warfare Studies \(CLAWS\)](#), Bimal Monga discusses the benefits and risks of establishing such a force.

In terms of benefits, Monga says a rocket force would deter China from threatening India using conventional missiles, provide India with an option to inflict severe damage on an adversary, increase the cost of aggression against India, suppress Chinese airbases and missile launch sites, enable engagement of time-sensitive targets, provide a quick-response

counter-strike, and send a strong message to an adversary.

Monga also discusses the risks of establishing a ballistic-missile force.

He notes that India lacks a well-formulated policy regarding the use of conventional missiles, the difficulty of distinguishing a conventional from a nuclear missile attack, the inability to reassure potential adversaries that conventional missiles will not threaten their nuclear forces, lack of destructive power to be a credible strategic deterrent, huge expenses involved in building a missile arsenal, and the potential to spark a missile arms race with China and Pakistan.

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Featured image: India test-fires its Agni-V ICBM on January 18, 2018. Photo: The Times of India via Indian Defense Ministry

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