

Long-Range Ballistic Missile Development: A Tale of Two Tests

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ACA Threat Assessment Brief
THE ARMS CONTROL ASSOCIATION *Analysis on Effective Policy Responses to Weapons-Related Security Threats*

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North Korea's failed attempt to launch a satellite from its Unha-3 space rocket on April 13 and India's successful flight test of the Agni-5 long-range missile on April 19 marked significant events in the ballistic missile development programs of the two countries. These two ballistic missile test events not only reveal technical information about system performance, but also invite reflection on U.S. policy responses. The demonstration of North Korean failure and Indian success is only the most readily accessible feature of the story. The broader implications for U.S. nonproliferation and security policies are more complicated and less obvious. Both cases imply U.S. failure to accurately assess threats and to adopt appropriate responses for mitigating those threats.

HIGHLIGHTS

- North Korea's unsuccessful satellite launch attempt on April 13 was the country's fourth consecutive mission failure in long-range ballistic missile flight tests over a 14-year period.
 - Two days later, North Korea rolled out what first appeared to be six road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) at a parade in Pyongyang but were actually mockups, according to a consensus of experts analyzing detailed photographs of the event.
- Given flight-testing evidence to date, and the assessed limitations of North Korean missile manufacturing technology, it will take the country many years to develop and deploy operational ICBMs.
 - The 1998 Rumsfeld Commission had predicted that North Korea could have an ICBM capability by 2003; a 1999 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate predicted the first North Korean ICBM flight test within months.
 - These projections were cited in justifying the U.S. Missile Defense Act of 1999, the 2001 decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and the rush to deploy strategic missile defenses by 2004.
- The flight test of a 5,000 kilometer range missile on April 19 was India's next evolutionary step in its Agni solid-fueled ballistic missile development program.
 - The apparent success of this test suggests the Agni-5 could become operational by the middle of the decade, ensuring India's ability to put Beijing at risk.
- Beijing's low-key reaction to the test was commendable; Washington's low-key reaction was not. The White House urged caution, but cited India's "solid nonproliferation record"—thereby undermining the credibility of U.S. nonproliferation policies.
 - India was the first to introduce nuclear weapons into South Asia and continues its refusal to sign the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Augmenting its long-range ballistic missile arsenal is just the latest example of India's failure to honor the nonproliferation directives of the UN Security Council.
- The United States has overreacted militarily to North Korea's ballistic missile program, leading to huge and unnecessary missile defense expenditures and major missed opportunities for achieving reductions in U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals.
- Washington's political underreaction to India's ballistic missile program has damaged U.S. ability to achieve critical nonproliferation goals.

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