

Preparing for “tomorrow’s wars,” India shoots down satellite

By Deepal Jayasekera
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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a special “address to the nation” last Wednesday to boast that India had become only the fourth ever country to shoot down a satellite.

The Defence Research and Development Organisation’s success in using an indigenously-developed missile to shoot down an Indian satellite in low-Earth orbit would, Modi claimed, “have an historic impact on generations to come.” “We are now a space power,” he thundered in a speech broadcast on television, radio and social media.

Modi’s ordering of a demonstration of India’s “space war” capabilities and his subsequent hyping of the test’s success in a nationwide address were driven by both strategic and immediate domestic political considerations.

In late February, India came to the brink of all-out war with Pakistan, after Modi ordered air strikes inside Pakistan for the first time since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war.

New Delhi’s demonstration of a potential to “blind” Pakistan by eliminating its space-based surveillance and communications satellites in any future conflict was certainly meant to frighten Islamabad. However, last week’s anti-satellite missile test was aimed first and foremost at China, the only country other than the US and Russia that had hitherto shot down a satellite.

In pursuit of the Indian bourgeoisie’s great power ambitions, New Delhi, under a succession of governments, whether led by Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Congress Party, has aligned India with Washington in opposing the growth of China’s economic and strategic power across Asia, while developing its own nuclear “triad”—the capacity to fire nuclear weapons from land, air and underwater—with the stated aim of “detering” Beijing.

A major element in the BJP’s campaign for India’s multi-phase April–May general election is the projection of Modi as a “strongman,” ready to aggressively assert India’s interests, especially against Pakistan, New Delhi’s nuclear-armed arch-rival.

The commandeering of India’s airwaves to announce the successful anti-satellite missile test was a shameless attempt to identify Modi with India’s military prowess, with the double aim of mobilizing the BJP’s right-wing Hindu communalist base and diverting mounting social anger among India’s workers and toilers along reactionary lines.

Even as he boasted in his nationwide address about India’s ability to shoot down an adversary’s satellites, Modi claimed that India’s intentions were purely peaceful and that the March 27 test was not directed against any country. A subsequent Ministry of External Affairs statement asserted India is “against the weaponisation of Outer Space and support(s) international efforts to reinforce the safety and security of space based assets.”

However, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, appearing at a press conference with Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman only hours after Modi’s address, was much more forthright, declaring that India has to prepare for “tomorrow’s wars.”

“We should remember,” said Jaitley, “tomorrow’s wars will not be the same as yesterday’s wars. Conventional army, navy, cyber, space... we have to prepare for all these. We are in such a geopolitical situation in the world, where our preparedness is our deterrent and ... our biggest security.”

In its report on Jaitley’s remarks, the *Indian Express* added that government sources insisted India’s demonstration of its “power to destroy” in space would bolster its international stature and thereby ensure New

Delhi will be among the “exclusive club” of states that will determine the rules governing space.

Modi has now incorporated the downing of the satellite into an election stump speech that was already bristling with nationalist bellicosity. At an election rally Thursday in Uttar Pradesh, Modi, referencing the cross-border attack he ordered on Pakistan in September 2016 and February’s bombing raid, boasted that his government has shown the courage to conduct “surgical strikes” in all spheres—“land, sky and space.” He then went on to declare the election a contest between “a decisive government and an indecisive past.”

All the opposition parties, from the Congress and a parade of regional and caste-based parties to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, have voiced support for the reactionary geo-political ambitions of Indian elite associated with last week’s missile test, while criticizing Modi for milking it for electoral gain. This is basically the same attitude they took to the February 26 airstrike: supporting the attack, while criticizing Modi for “politicizing” it.

Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi issued a tweet congratulating the DRDO and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) on the success of the test, while sarcastically wishing Modi a “very Happy World Theatre Day.” For his part, senior Congress leader Ahmed Patel tweeted that it was India’s previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government that “had initiated the ASAT (anti-satellite) program which has reached fruition today.”

In a letter to the Election Commission, CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury complained that Modi’s televised address violated the Model Code of Conduct that is in force during election campaigns. “Such a mission,” argued Yechury, “should normally be announced. .. by the relevant scientific authorities like the DRDO.”

The Indian media has almost universally lauded the test as proof of India’s growing military-technological sophistication, although much of the commentary has also argued that India must invest much more in developing its military capabilities.

“Delhi’s explicit demonstration of space weapon capabilities is welcome,” declared an *Indian Express* editorial, “but it must be part of a clearly articulated

military space doctrine that identifies India’s political objectives and technological goals in outer space and the strategy to realise them.”

Washington responded to India’s anti-satellite missile test by effectively voicing support for India developing its military space capabilities. A US State Department spokesperson told the Press Trust of India, “We will continue to pursue shared interests in space and scientific and technical cooperation [with India], including collaboration on safety and security in space.” Washington’s only concern was that the Indian missile test has created a large amount of space debris.

With the aim of harnessing India to its military-strategic offensive against China, successive Democratic and Republican administrations have showered strategic favours on New Delhi, emboldening it in its confrontation with Pakistan. These favours include giving India access to advanced civilian nuclear technology and fuel, which allows New Delhi to focus its own nuclear program on weapons development, and to the advanced weapons systems the US sells it most “trusted” allies.

Like India, the US is aggressively preparing for great-power conflict in outer space. In June 2018, Trump announced he was creating a “Space Force” as the sixth branch of the US military.

Islamabad has deplored the Indian anti-satellite missile test as a step toward the “weaponisation of space.” The response of Beijing—which has an “all-weather” strategic partnership with Pakistan, but is also anxious not to push New Delhi further into Washington’s strategic embrace—was more cautious. In reference to last Wednesday’s test a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement declared. “We have noticed relevant reports and we wish all countries can effectively maintain peace and tranquility of outer space.”

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