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Agni-III Ballistic Missile Test — India's Strategic Deterrence Architecture and the Agni Programme

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Agni-III Ballistic Missile Test — India's Strategic Deterrence Architecture and the Agni Programme

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WHY IN NEWS

India successfully test-fired the Agni-III intermediate-range ballistic missile from the Integrated Test Range at Chandipur, Odisha, under supervision of the Strategic Forces Command — validating operational readiness parameters of a key leg of India's nuclear deterrence capability.

THE AGNI MISSILE PROGRAMME — ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The **Agni missile programme** is India's most strategically significant ballistic missile development effort, managed by the **Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)** through its Advanced Systems Laboratory (ASL) in Hyderabad. The programme traces its origins to the **Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP)**, launched in **1983** under Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, which aimed to develop five missile systems: Agni (surface-to-surface), Prithvi (surface-to-surface, tactical), Akash (surface-to-air), Trishul (surface-to-air, short range), and Nag (anti-tank).

The first Agni technology demonstrator was tested in **February 1988** — a short-range vehicle that established propulsion, guidance, and re-entry vehicle technologies. Subsequent decades saw the programme mature from proof-of-concept to deployable strategic weapons.

AGNI VARIANTS — A FAMILY OF BALLISTIC MISSILES

Variant	Type	Range	Status
Agni-I	Short-range BM (SRBM)	700–1,200 km	Inducted
Agni-II	Medium-range BM (MRBM)	2,000–3,000 km	Inducted
Agni-III	Intermediate-range BM (IRBM)	3,000–5,000 km	Inducted
Agni-IV	Intermediate-range BM (IRBM)	3,500–4,000 km	Inducted
Agni-V	Intercontinental BM (ICBM)	5,000–8,000+ km	Inducted (2024)
Agni-P	New generation, canister-launched	~1,000–2,000 km	Testing phase
Agni-VI	Under development	10,000–12,000+ km	Development

Agni-III specifically:

Type: Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM)

Range: 3,000–5,000 km (February 2026 test: validated range 3,000+ km)

Payload capacity: ~1.5 tonnes (single warhead; technically capable of MIRV — Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles — though not confirmed for Agni-III)

Propulsion: Two-stage, solid-fuel rocket motor

Launch platform: Road-mobile TEL (Transporter Erector Launcher) — enhances survivability by enabling pre-launch mobility

First test: July 2006; inducted: approximately 2011–12

THE TEST RANGE AND TESTING PROTOCOL

Agni tests are conducted from the **Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Chandipur**, Odisha (near Balasore), managed by DRDO's Proof and Experimental Establishment (PXE). The ITR provides radar, telemetry, and tracking infrastructure for the full flight path.

The test is conducted under the **Strategic Forces Command (SFC)**, established in **January 2003** under the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA). The SFC is a tri-service command responsible for:

Custody, storage, and maintenance of nuclear weapons and delivery systems

Training of nuclear forces operators

Operational planning for nuclear strike missions

The **Nuclear Command Authority (NCA)** — established following the **Draft Nuclear Doctrine of 1999** and formalised in **2003** — consists of:

Political Council (chaired by the Prime Minister): sole authority to authorise nuclear weapon use

Executive Council (chaired by the National Security Advisor): provides inputs and implements directives

India follows a **No First Use (NFU) policy**: India will not use nuclear weapons first, but reserves the right to "massive retaliation" if attacked with nuclear weapons. NFU is a stated policy commitment, not a legally binding treaty obligation.

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF AGNI-III

Agni-III's 3,000+ km range places the following within India's nuclear reach:

Entire Pakistan (from any launch site in India)

Substantial portions of China, including major cities (Beijing is ~3,500 km from northeastern India; Shanghai ~2,900 km from eastern India; Chengdu — home to Western Theatre Command — ~2,400 km)

This makes Agni-III a **China-oriented deterrent** (unlike Agni-I and II, which are primarily Pakistan-relevant). The ability to credibly hold Chinese strategic assets at risk from mobile, road-deployable launchers across peninsular and northeastern India is a key requirement of India's minimum credible deterrence posture.

The regular test-firing of Agni-III (multiple tests since first in 2006) serves as:

User validation: SFC operators confirming operational parameters

Technical verification: Post-storage/maintenance checks on ageing components

Political signalling: Demonstrating maintained deterrence capability

INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE — KEY PILLARS

India's nuclear doctrine, articulated in the **Draft Nuclear Doctrine (1999)** and the subsequent **Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) review (January 2003)**, rests on five pillars:

No First Use (NFU): No use of nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state; sole purpose is deterrence

Minimum Credible Deterrence: Sufficient to deter but no arms race; "recessed deterrence" — weapons not on hair-trigger alert

Massive Retaliation: Nuclear attack on India or Indian forces will result in "punishing retaliation"

Civilian Control: Nuclear Command Authority under PM (political council)

Safety and Security: Robust command and control to prevent unauthorised use

India is not a signatory to the **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)**, which it has consistently argued is discriminatory (grandfathering the five P5 nuclear powers while denying others the right to develop nuclear energy). India signed the **Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT)** moratorium in 2008 but has not ratified it.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Agni-III (IRBM, 3,000+ km, Chandipur ITR); Strategic Forces Command (SFC, est. January 2003); Nuclear Command Authority (NCA: Political Council + Executive Council); No First Use policy; IGMDP (1983, Dr. Kalam); Agni-V (ICBM, 5,000–8,000 km, inducted 2024); Agni-P (canister-launched, testing); Proof and Experimental Establishment (PXE), Chandipur; Draft Nuclear Doctrine 1999; CCS review January 2003; NPT (India not a signatory).

India's ballistic missile programme (Agni family); nuclear doctrine and its pillars; Strategic Forces Command structure; No First Use policy — significance and debates; India's deterrence posture vis-a-vis Pakistan and China; civilian control of nuclear weapons.

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AGNI-III — SPECIFIC DATA:

Type: **Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM)**

Range: **3,000–5,000 km**

Payload: ~**1.5 tonnes**

Propulsion: **Two-stage solid fuel**

First test: **July 2006**

Inducted: ~**2011–12**

Launch mode: Road-mobile TEL (Transporter Erector Launcher)

Test site: **ITR (Integrated Test Range), Chandipur, Odisha**

AGNI FAMILY — RANGE SUMMARY:

Agni-I: **700–1,200 km** (SRBM)

Agni-II: **2,000–3,000 km** (MRBM)

Agni-III: **3,000–5,000 km** (IRBM)

Agni-IV: **3,500–4,000 km** (IRBM)

Agni-V: **5,000–8,000+ km** (ICBM; inducted 2024)

Agni-P: ~**1,000–2,000 km** (next-gen, canister; testing)

Agni-VI: **10,000–12,000 km** (under development; MIRV capable)

NUCLEAR COMMAND AUTHORITY (INDIA):

Established: **January 2003** (following Cabinet Committee on Security review)

Political Council: Chaired by **Prime Minister** — sole authority to authorise nuclear use

Executive Council: Chaired by **National Security Advisor (NSA)**

Strategic Forces Command: Tri-service; operationalises nuclear delivery; reports to NCA

INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE:

NFU: **No First Use** (will not use nuclear weapons first)

Posture: **Minimum Credible Deterrence**

Retaliation: **Massive** — if attacked with nuclear weapons by any state

Civilian control: PM chairs Political Council of NCA

Draft Doctrine: **1999**; CCS formalisation: **January 2003**

IGMDP (INTEGRATED GUIDED MISSILE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME):

Launched: **1983**

Father: **Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam** (then DRDO scientist, later President 2002–07)

Five systems: **Agni, Prithvi, Akash, Trishul, Nag**

IGMDP formally closed: 2008 (objectives achieved)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Advanced Systems Laboratory (ASL), Hyderabad: DRDO lab for ballistic missile development

India not signatory to NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty); criticism: discriminatory

CTBT: India supports moratorium but has not ratified

> Ballistic Missile vs Cruise Missile: Ballistic = gravity/guided arc; Cruise = sustained powered flight at low altitude (BrahMos is cruise missile, not ballistic)
>
> Prithvi missile (tactical): Range 150–350 km; battlefield nuclear role; surface-to-surface

Sources: AffairsCloud, Drishti IAS

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