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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Mission Divyastra – MIRV Changes India's Strategic Equations, Not Its Doctrine

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Mission Divyastra — MIRV Changes India's Strategic Equations, Not Its Doctrine

The Hindu

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GS2

GS3

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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India's MIRV capability reinforces its No First Use doctrine by strengthening second-strike credibility. But critics argue NFU is becoming less credible given China's nuclear buildup and Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons. Should India revisit its NFU doctrine, and what are the risks of doing so?"

The successful test of India's Agni-V with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) capability under Mission Divyastra is a significant milestone in India's strategic deterrence posture. But it is important to understand what it changes — and what it does not.

MIRV does not change India's nuclear doctrine. It does not signal a move toward first-strike strategy. It is, fundamentally, a **second-strike capability enhancer** — technology that makes India's retaliatory threat more credible in the face of adversary improvements in missile defence and offensive counterforce capability.

WHAT PROBLEM DOES MIRV SOLVE?

India's strategic environment has changed substantially since it codified its nuclear doctrine in the early 2000s. The doctrine's two foundational principles — No First Use and Massive Retaliation — require a credible second-strike capability. That credibility depends on the ability to absorb an adversary's first strike and still retain enough delivery vehicles and warheads to inflict "unacceptable damage."

Two developments in India's threat environment have eroded this credibility over the past decade:

China's expanding missile defence. China has deployed the **HQ-19** and is developing national missile defence capabilities that could, in theory, intercept a significant fraction of India's Agni missiles in a counterforce-degraded scenario. A MIRV-capable Agni-V, deploying 3-5 independently targeted warheads alongside decoys, dramatically raises the interception burden — from 10 missiles to 30-50 warheads and decoys. No current missile defence system can confidently handle that volume.

China's MIRV deployment. China's **DF-5B and DF-41** have MIRV capability, giving the PLA Rocket Force a vastly expanded warhead count relative to launcher count. This asymmetry matters: a Chinese first strike could destroy many more Indian delivery vehicles than a single-warhead counterpart, degrading India's surviving retaliatory force. India's MIRV restores the balance — fewer surviving Agni-Vs can still deliver catastrophic retaliation.

WHAT MIRV DOES NOT CHANGE

Mission Divyastra does not alter the fundamental structure of India's nuclear doctrine — and it should not be used as a pretext for revising it.

No First Use remains correct. The NFU doctrine is not primarily about being nice to adversaries — it is about deterrence stability. If both India and Pakistan (or India and China) have NFU doctrines, neither side has an incentive to strike first. Abandoning NFU introduces **first-strike instability**: the fear that the other side might strike first creates pressure to pre-empt, which creates pressure on the other side to pre-empt, spiralling into crisis instability.

Pakistan's **tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs)** — designed for use on the battlefield against conventional Indian forces — are sometimes cited as an argument for India abandoning NFU. The reasoning: India's massive retaliation threat is not credible in response to a tactical nuclear use, because India would not destroy Pakistani cities over a battlefield tactical warhead.

But this argument has a counter-argument: India's massive retaliation threat **against tactical nuclear use** serves a different purpose — it is designed to deter Pakistan from crossing the nuclear threshold at all, not to respond proportionally after it is crossed. Whether India would actually follow through is deliberately ambiguous — and that ambiguity itself contributes to deterrence stability.

THE BIGGER PICTURE — INDIA'S NUCLEAR MODERNISATION

Mission Divyastra is part of a broader nuclear modernisation programme that includes:

MIRV on Agni-V (confirmed by Mission Divyastra)

INS Arighat (India's second SSBN after Arihant), with K-4 SLBM (3,500 km range)

Agni Prime (road-mobile, canisterised — faster to deploy)

Agni-VI (under development — reportedly 10,000+ km range)

This programme is calibrated, measured, and consistent with India's **Minimum Credible Deterrence** posture — enough to credibly threaten unacceptable damage, not enough to pursue a warfighting nuclear capability.

The test is a message to Beijing more than Islamabad: India's second-strike capability will survive Chinese counterforce efforts, and that capability will be MIRV-capable and impossible to intercept. That message is a stabilising one — it removes the temptation to deploy counterforce strategies, because they would not succeed.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Mission Divyastra, MIRV (6th country), Agni-V (5,000-5,500 km), NFU doctrine, Massive Retaliation, NCA (Nuclear Command Authority), SFC (Strategic Forces Command), INS Arihant/Arighat, K-4 SLBM, DF-41/DF-5B (China MIRV).

MAINS GS-3:

Nuclear security; India's nuclear doctrine and modernisation; strategic stability; India-China-Pakistan nuclear dynamics.

INTERVIEW:

“India's nuclear doctrine is often described as ‘ambiguous’ on NFU despite the formal policy. Is strategic ambiguity beneficial or destabilising?”

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INDIA'S NFU DOCTRINE — KEY ELEMENTS:

No First Use: Will not initiate nuclear strike

Massive Retaliation: Devastating response even to tactical nuclear use

Non-use against NNWS: Non-Nuclear Weapon States excluded from nuclear targeting

Authority: **Nuclear Command Authority (NCA)** under **Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)**

Executor: **Strategic Forces Command (SFC)**

MIRV AND DETERRENCE:

Overcomes missile defence: Multiple warheads + decoys overwhelm interceptors

Reduces vulnerability to counterforce: Fewer missiles needed for credible second strike

China's MIRV: DF-5B (10 warheads), DF-41 (10+ warheads) — drove India's MIRV development

INDIA'S NUCLEAR MODERNISATION PROGRAMME:

Agni-V MIRV: **Mission Divyastra 2026** (operational capability)

INS Arihant: SSBN (S2 class); K-15 Sagarika (700km) + K-4 (3,500km) SLBMs

INS Arighat: 2nd SSBN; larger K-4 capacity

Agni Prime: Road-mobile, canisterised; 1,000-2,000km

Agni-VI: Under development; reported 10,000+ km range

TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND INDIA'S RESPONSE:

Pakistan has TNWs (Nasr/Hatf-IX, 60km range) for battlefield use

India's position: Massive retaliation applies regardless of nuclear yield

Rationale: Deters Pakistan from crossing nuclear threshold at all

Sources: The Hindu, DRDO, PIB

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