



Heading towards strategic instability

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India must be alert as there is a possibility of emerging disruptive technologies prompting inadvertent conflict

- In late 2018, the government decided to set up three new agencies — the Defence Cyber Agency, the Defence Space Agency and the Special Operations Division — in order to address the new age challenges to national security.
- While this is indeed a useful step in the right direction, it is also important to note that the constitution of these agencies is a far cry from the crucial recommendations given by the Naresh Chandra Task Force and the Chiefs of Staff Committee, both of which had suggested the formation of three separate joint commands to deal with new challenges to India's national security in the cyber, space and special operations domains.

High-tech innovations

- The current focus in military thinking across the world is increasingly moving away from traditional heavy-duty military hardware to high-tech innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, satellite jammers, hypersonic strike technology, advanced cyber capabilities and spectrum denial and high-energy lasers.
- In the light of the unprecedented capabilities that these systems offer, there is also an increased focus on developing suitable command and control as well as doctrinal concepts to accommodate and calibrate them.
- The arrival of these technologies might deeply frustrate strategic stability as we know it given their disruptive nature.
- Strategic stability in the contemporary international system, especially among the nuclear weapon states, depends on several age-old certainties, the most important being the issue of survivability of a state's nuclear arsenal and its ability to carry out a second strike after a first attack.

- Now add the arrival of these new technologies to the emerging strategic competition among great powers.
- The U.S.'s withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty is perhaps an indication of a potential arms race in the offing.

Fears of conflict

- While on the one hand, it is imperative for states to redesign their systems in the light of these new technologies, especially the digital and cyber components, this also makes the cyber- and digital-enabled systems vulnerable to covert cyberattacks.
- The biggest fear about these technologies, the implications of which we don't fully understand yet, is their potential to increase the risks of intentional and inadvertent nuclear use.
- The fear of a bolt-from-the-blue attack against one's command and control systems or a disabling strike against strategic arsenal using new technological solutions is likely to dominate the strategic mindspace of great powers in the days ahead, thereby further deepening mistrust and creating instability.
- Therefore, the possibility of emerging military technologies prompting inadvertent escalation and conflict cannot and should not be ruled out.

Chinese capabilities

- China has emerged as a key actor in the field of emerging military technologies.
- Some analysts believe that Beijing is in the lead position in emerging technologies with potential military applications such as quantum computing, 3D printing, hypersonic missiles and AI.
- If indeed, Beijing continues to develop hypersonic systems, for instance, it could potentially target a range of targets in the U.S.
- While the Chinese focus is evidently on U.S. capabilities, which China interprets as a potential threat, this is not without latent concerns for New Delhi.
- The cascading strategic competition then looks unavoidable at this point, and that is worrisome.
- And yet, it might be difficult to avoid some of these developments given their dual use.
- It is in this context that we must revisit the government's decision to set up the agencies to address cyber and space challenges.
- Clearly, this is a timely effort from the government to have finally

decided to set them up — though they are not yet in place.

- It is unfortunate that unlike what was envisioned earlier, these agencies will be reduced in their powers and their standing in the pecking order of defence planning in the country.
- Moreover, reports indicate that the Space Command will be headed by the Air Force, the Army will head the Special Operations Command, and the Navy will be given the responsibility of the Cyber Command.
- If indeed that happens, their effectiveness in terms of tri-service synergy will be much less than anticipated.

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