



JAIPAL SINGH/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

People in Jammu, Kashmir, watching Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India announce that the country had destroyed a satellite in orbit, 186 miles above Earth.

# Missile test upsets fragile balance

NEW DELHI

By downing satellite, India risks destabilized relations with Pakistan and China

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN AND HARI KUMAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement that India had successfully test-fired an interceptor rocket could destabilize the balance of power between India and Pakistan, two nuclear-armed nations that for years have eyed each other warily, with hostilities briefly breaking out last month.

This technological leap puts India alongside the United States, Russia and China in an exclusive club of nations that have proved their ability to destroy targets in space. This could be a crucial advantage in war, allowing a country to essentially blind a foe by taking out the enemy's space-based communication and surveillance satellites.

But it could also accelerate the country's space race with China and destabilize the uneasy balance of power between India and Pakistan.

Shooting down a satellite is no easy feat. In this case, scientists estimate that the satellite that India blasted apart was moving around the Earth at 17,000 miles per hour.

Mr. Modi made the announcement to a rapt nation just weeks before the country heads into a hotly contested election.

"India stands tall as a space power!" Mr. Modi tweeted after his announcement on Wednesday. He added that the entire effort had been "indigenous," accomplished entirely by Indians.

When China first successfully tested such an antisatellite missile in 2007, it set off global concern over the growing weaponization of space.

Many analysts now worry that the regional rivalry between India and China, the two most populous countries in the world, has moved into space.

India's test was a "demonstration against China," said Kazuto Suzuki, an international relations professor at Hokkaido University in Japan and an expert



SAM PANTHAKY/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Students in Ahmedabad, India, celebrating the missile test. The test came just two weeks before Mr. Modi stands for re-election.

popular support after India conducted airstrikes last month in Balakot, Pakistan, in retaliation for a deadly suicide bombing by militants against Indian forces in Kashmir, that story is no longer in the headlines.

The missile-test announcement "shows a poll-eve desperation we hadn't yet detected/suspected," tweeted Shekhar Gupta, one of India's best known political commentators. "It's just a frantic new national security headline as Balakot has faded in a month."

On Wednesday morning, Mr. Modi posted a message on Twitter, which he uses frequently, telling Indians to tune in because he was about to make a major announcement.

Many people believed the speech would be related to Pakistan; tensions

Delhi, the capital, grew uncharacteristically quiet. Many people ducked inside shops to watch TV.

Saurav Jha, the editor in chief of "Delhi Defence Review," an online magazine, said that shooting down a satellite was a major achievement.

"It's as significant as India's first nuclear blast," he said.

India has been steadily advancing its space program since its first satellite launch in 1975. It joined a manned space mission with Russia in 1984 and launched a Mars orbiter in 2013. In December, India sent its heaviest communication satellite so far, weighing nearly 5,000 pounds, into space.

As China has stepped up its satellite launches and space probes, India has been motivated to catch up. The test, Mr.

use of nuclear weapons. But if it can leverage its new antisatellite technology to move ahead with antimissile defenses, which require hitting an incoming warhead in space, it could change the strategic balance.

"The militarization of space is underway, whether anybody likes it or not," Mr. Jha said. Part of the reason, he said, was that satellite technology had become "the backbone of global communication."

The Indian government did not reveal what kind of satellite it had destroyed; the Ministry of External Affairs described it as "one of India's existing satellites operating in a lower orbit."

Mr. Modi has revived the notion that he is India's "chowkidar," or watchman, and looking tough in space seemed to fit with that image.

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When China first successfully tested such an antisatellite missile in 2007, it set off global concern over the growing weaponization of space.

Many analysts now worry that the regional rivalry between India and China, the two most populous countries in the world, has moved into space.

India's test was a "demonstration against China," said Kazuto Suzuki, an international relations professor at Hokkaido University in Japan and an expert on space security.

"The proliferation of this technology and capability would make the space order very unstable," he said.

In Washington, Air Force Lt. Gen. David D. Thompson told a Senate hearing on Wednesday that India's test did occur, and that the Pentagon was aware beforehand because India had announced flight bans. General Thompson, the vice commander of the Air Force Space Command, said that the explosion had been detected at Buckley Air Force Base in Colorado.

He said that the test "struck the target vehicle" and created 270 pieces of debris that would likely increase as the debris field expanded. He added that the International Space Station was "not at risk."

Mr. Modi broke the news in a rare televised address to the nation, and many Indians immediately suspected that his primary objective was more political than technological.

In a little more than two weeks, India will begin holding an election — the biggest in history, with nearly 900 million registered voters — and Mr. Modi is up for re-election. Leaders in his political party, Bharatiya Janata, have recently been heckled in public and attendance has been poor at rallies for some of the party's candidates.

Though Mr. Modi enjoyed a burst of



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On Wednesday morning, Mr. Modi posted a message on Twitter, which he uses frequently, telling Indians to tune in because he was about to make a major announcement.

Many people believed the speech would be related to Pakistan; tensions had risen fast and high last month after Indian warplanes dropped several bombs on the site in Balakot where the Indian authorities said militants were hiding. It is not clear what, if anything, the Indian Air Force hit.

But the next day Pakistan shot down an Indian fighter jet and captured the pilot, pushing the two nations dangerously close to a major conflict. Pakistan quickly defused the situation by releasing the pilot.

The whole episode brought Mr. Modi a wave of support. The thorny issues that had been stalking him — such as rising unemployment, poor drinking water and widespread distress among farmers — disappeared for a moment.

Flags came out across the country. Even Indians who disagreed with the Hindu nationalist flavor of Mr. Modi's party still cheered him.

But in the past few days, the electoral mood seems to have shifted once again. Complaints about jobs, health care and farm subsidies have been rising.

Indian National Congress, the leading opposition party, scored some points after its leader, Rahul Gandhi, the scion of a political dynasty, promised that the Congress party would give the equivalent of \$1,000 to India's poorest families.

Around noon, when Mr. Modi was set to address the nation, the streets of New

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Jha said, was "very much the part of the India-China rivalry."

Another factor may have been India's archrival, Pakistan. Last year, China helped Pakistan launch a remote sensing satellite. India's test suggested it could blast apart the Pakistani eye in the sky, turning it into space garbage.

This could make the bitter contest between India and Pakistan even more dangerous. Before this test, the two militaries were widely viewed as comparable. Each side has been reluctant to start a major conflict, fearing that the other could stage a devastating counter-attack.

But some analysts said that India might now be able to stage a pre-emptive attack on Pakistan's satellites. That could unsettle the doctrine of mutually assured destruction that both countries have long followed, and put Pakistan even more on edge.

It also could presage a change in Indian nuclear strategy. The country has always promised it would make no first

use of nuclear weapons. But if it can leverage its new antisatellite technology to move ahead with antimissile defenses, which require hitting an incoming warhead in space, it could change the strategic balance.

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"Today's success, in the coming days, will be seen as India's forward march toward a secure nation, a rich nation and a peaceful nation," he said.

The test on Wednesday morning took three minutes and hit the satellite as it was orbiting about 186 miles above Earth.

It was low enough, Indian officials said, that its debris will decay and fall back to Earth.

In 2012, Indian scientists announced that they had the capability to shoot down a satellite but that it would take 24 months to prepare for such a test.

Some analysts wondered if Mr. Modi, known as a cunning political strategist, planned as early as two years ago to conduct this test right before this year's election.

"The timing indicates that there is politics around this," said N.K. Singh, a political analyst. "The issues of food, clothing, housing and employment are emerging on the surface in bigger way?"

He added: "Nobody can say for sure, but the perception of politicization is there."

Reporting was contributed by Suhasini Raj from New Delhi, David E. Sanger from San Francisco and Thomas Gibbons-Neff from Washington.