

# Fire wall: Why Agni Missile Department holds strategic importance for India's safety

By Amarnath K. Menon

*Agni Missile Department, established in 1989, is responsible for creating nuclear missiles like Agni-I, Agni-II, Agni-III, Agni-IV and Agni-V. The missiles belong to the family of medium to intercontinental ballistic missiles and were named after one of the five elements of nature.*

From the start, Agni was appreciated as a distinct product and, sensing its strategic importance, separated from India's Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme. Agni-I, with a range of 700 kilometres, was first test-fired in 1989. Agni-II, an intermediate range ballistic missile, was tested in 1999. It has a range of 2,000-2,500 km and can carry both conventional and nuclear warheads. Agni-III, with a range of 3,500-5,000 km, was inducted in 2011, allowing strike capability deep inside neighbouring countries. Agni-IV was developed within a similar range but shorter flight time. It can carry a 1,000 kg payload. Agni-V, with a range of over 5,000 km, was a formidable addition to India's strategic defence. Agni's pioneer, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, would always turn poetic when talking about it. "Friends, you now have the fire to touch the Agni," he once wrote in his notebook.

In future, Agni-V is expected to feature the Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle concept, with each missile capable of carrying 2 to 10 separate nuclear warheads. Each warhead can be assigned a different target. Alternatively, two or more warheads can be assigned one target. India is also developing Agni-VI, with a range of 8,000-10,000 km.

## Armed And Ready

Agni-V is the most sophisticated and lethal in the series of medium to intercontinental range ballistic missiles being developed by India. It can strike targets more than 5,000 km away and carry a nuclear warhead of over 1 tonne. On induction, the missile will put India in a super-exclusive club of countries with ICBMs, alongside the United States, Russia, China, France and Britain.

## Did you know?

Hours before the first test, Kalam got a call from a top government official about US-NATO pressure to delay the launch.