



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 13, 2023

India to Buy Air Defense Missiles for Contested Border With China

SINGAPORE — India will purchase portable air defense missiles to install along its contested border with China, as regional militarization increases amid escalating bilateral ties.

The Defense Acquisition Council led by Defense Minister Rajnath Singh greenlighted the purchase of the very short-range missiles, based on a statement issued January 10. “In view of the recent developments along the Northern borders, there is a need to focus on effective air defense weapon systems which are man portable and can be deployed quickly in rugged terrain,” the Defense Ministry stated.



Dhruba Jyoti Baruah/iStock/Getty Images Plus
Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Created to neutralize low-altitude aerial threats at close range, the missile is designed and built by Indian research organization DRDO and is similar to U.S.-made FIM-92 Stinger surface-to-air missiles. Such defense missile systems have shown to be potent in recent conflicts, with the Pentagon offering at least 1,600 Stinger missile systems to Ukraine to parry Russian air raids.

Friction along the Asian nations’ contested border has risen since the June 2020 confrontation that resulted in at least 20 Indian and four Chinese casualties. That fighting was mainly around the Himalayan region of Ladakh, along their 3,488-kilometer border known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In December last year, troops confronted each other in the northeast Indian border state of Arunachal Pradesh.

India’s Defense Ministry also approved the purchase of domestically made anti-tank missiles for helicopters and Brahmos anti-ship missiles for its warships. The total cost of the military hardware amounts to 42.76 billion rupees, but the ministry did not provide details about the estimated price of each of the three items.

With both China and India stepping up their military defenses on their Himalayan border, analysts fear that a more violent clash may happen. Although military commanders of the two nations have organized 17 rounds of talks to mitigate the border crisis, progress has been limited.

In the last three years, China has been swiftly building barracks and patrol facilities just north of where the confrontation happened, said New Delhi-based Dr. Manoj Joshi, distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi and author of a new book titled *Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya*.

Dr. Joshi was giving a talk on *The Straits Times’ Asian Insider* video and podcast on the ramifications of December’s clash. “Right along the Line of Actual Control, we are seeing that there’s a build-up on both sides,” he said. “That is why in my book, I call it the enduring threat of war — because if you have a



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build-up, and you have a dispute which is bubbling up ... the chances of this becoming a shooting dispute are pretty high.”

Beijing stakes its sovereignty claims on the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Moreover, Tawang is at the intersection with Tibet, with the nearly 400-year-old Tawang Monastery being one of the most sacred places for Tibetan Buddhism. For years, Beijing has been trying to assert control and influence in the Tibetan territory, albeit with limited success.

“There are those who argue that [China would like control over territory where a future \(Tibetan spiritual leader\) Dalai Lama successor](#) may come about — and so therefore, it would like control over the Tawang region,” said Dr. Aparna Pande, director of the Initiative on the Future of India and South Asia at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.

Speaking alongside Dr. Joshi on *Asian Insider*, Dr. Pande elaborated that China’s actions on the border are only serving to push India and the U.S. even closer. “The more aggressive China is on the border or in India’s neighborhood, the greater likelihood that India is ... more aligned to the United States and its partners,” she said.

In light of the glacial Sino-Indian ties, India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not meet Chinese authoritarian leader Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in September 2022. Xi’s third term in power after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s congress last October is not necessarily viewed in a favorable light by India.

Observers contend that Xi is likely to ramp up the Chinese military presence along the contested border, possibly leading to more skirmishes with India.

“Every indication is that there is going to be a tough road ahead for India-China relations.... The tone and tenor of Xi Jinping’s speech are quite categorical that he doesn’t intend to rethink some of his older policies and wants to double down on them,” opined Professor Harsh V. Pant, vice president of studies and foreign policy at the Observer Research Foundation. “Clearly when it comes to India, there is no appetite to consider the deterioration (of ties) as a real challenge for China. Therefore, it’s very unlikely that we are going to see an improvement in Sino-Indian relations. In fact, deterioration is more likely the way to go. This also perhaps applies to other cases when it comes to China’s ties with Taiwan or the Western world.”

Even some newspaper headlines in India have reflected the bleak outlook surrounding the future of Sino-Indian relations.

“Rise of emperor Xi is ominous for India and Quad,” read a headline in *The Hindustan Times*. Quad refers to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which groups India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, and is denounced by China.

Additionally, India took notice of the reshuffling of China’s military leadership, such as the promotion of General He Weidong to vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, the top military command.

Gen. He had served as head of ground forces in the People’s Liberation Army’s Western Theatre Command and was commander of the Eastern Theatre Command. He was at the helm when India and China engaged for over two months in Doklam — an area between India, China, and Bhutan — in 2017.

While Beijing has indicated that it is keen to enhance relations, New Delhi has regularly highlighted that border peace is a condition for relations to be normalized.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, following a farewell call with outgoing Chinese Ambassador Sun



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Weidong on Tuesday, tweeted: “Emphasized that the development of India-China relations is guided by the 3 Mutuals [mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest]. Peace and tranquility in the border areas is essential. The normalization of India-China relations is in the interest of both countries, of Asia and the world at large.”

In his parting comments, Sun said the two countries “should seek common ground while reserving differences.”

Besides the border troubles, India has also been worried about the increasing Chinese presence in the region — from Sri Lanka in the South to Nepal and Pakistan in the North.

China has been participating in major infrastructure projects, including bankrolling and then taking over Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, as well as the Pakistan Economic Corridor — China’s Belt and Road Initiative that entails constructing ports and railway lines.

The increasing Chinese presence could prove to be a stumbling block towards a normalization of bilateral relations, analysts said.

The two countries were unhappy over the docking of a Chinese research and survey vessel in Sri Lanka. New Delhi had security concerns over the docking of the Chinese ship, and Colombo permitted the ship to dock only five days after the scheduled date, supposedly due to Indian concerns.

“Perhaps Xi taking control of the party and the state (for a third time) will lead to more aggression,” said Professor B.R. Deepak, a China expert from Jawaharlal Nehru University. “The situation along the border is already aggravated. The de-escalation of troops is yet to happen. In this context, China’s forays into the Indian Ocean with its naval capacity being enhanced will be a new normal.”



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