Missile Firing Cargo Merchant Ships: Upcoming Maritime Threat

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Introduction:

The Greeks used the hollow wooden Trojan horse to gain entry into the city of Troy. In the present times, a similar kind of deception technique is being developed by maritime countries for offensive or defensive operations. The idea of converting a cargo container ship into a missile firing vessel is a lethal proposal and will be a challenge for maritime security in the near future. All major missile powers are considering this proposal. If it becomes a reality, the idea of second-strike capability of nuclear states will get a huge boost, apart from the traditional submarine fired ballistic missile capabilities at present.

Current Developments:

Countries like Israel, Russia, USA and China are said to be working on this for many years. In 2010, Russia was reported to be developing a new cruise missile system which can be hidden inside a shipping container, giving any merchant vessel the capability to wipe out an aircraft carrier.[i] Known as the Club-K system, the concept was of an ordinary shipping container with the Club-K missile inside which could be hidden among other containers on a train or a ship. When required, the roof lifts off and the four missiles stand upright ready to fire.[ii]

In 2017, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) said it had successfully test-fired its Long-Range Artillery (LORA) system from a containerised launcher on the back of a truck sitting on the deck of a cargo ship.[iii] In 2019, the US Naval experts advocated for the conversion of merchant ships into durable, inexpensive, weapons trucks carrying missiles.[iv] India's competitor China has already started the construction of a container-type sea defense combat system. In 2022, at the Chinese Airshow in Zhuhai, South China's Guangdong province, China debuted such containers which could effectively improve its coastal defense capabilities by outstanding mobility and capability to disguise itself.[v] As of now China is claiming that these are to be used only for safeguarding the Chinese Exclusive Economic Zone(EEZ), which is a kind of defence posture. Based on this development itself, Taiwan security experts are also advocating for converting cargo ships into missile firing ships.[vi]

Need for Missile containers:

The need for such containers is perceived differently by different nation states. For example, Russia feels that such hidden missiles in shipping containers can give them the capability to wipe out an aircraft carrier.[vii] They feel it's a new concept and nobody, not even their strategic competitor (USA), has done so before, which is true. For Israel, the benefits of these systems are relatively low-cost launchers and the lack of the need for a dedicated missile-armed vessel.[viii] As the Israeli naval assets will have to grapple with the growing Iranian threats at the sea, this development is consequential.

The USA feels that their traditional shipbuilding industry is not able to keep pace with the growing demand of achieving the target of 355 naval vessels by the year 2034.[ix] Even this

target is being challenged by their strategic competitor, China, which is rapidly growing it's naval fleet. As far as China is concerned, experts feel that these systems fit with Beijing's military strategy and likely would be used as an offensive capability against their enemies – potentially being smuggled into foreign ports anywhere in the world. Such shipping container missile launchers can be smuggled through ports or via highway ports of entry. They could then be stored for years in a climate-controlled building within range of China's rival military bases, and taken out and fired when needed.[x]

Pros & Cons of Missile containers:

Apart from the above needs of the countries, missile container ships in general offer a wide array of benefits. They reduce the fixed wing air-power use, can be loaded quickly, they don't need any large modifications and can ensure precision strike.[xi] They also provide ease of transportation by existing infrastructure like roads and railways just like the road mobile ballistic missiles are transported in land. In future it will be difficult for militaries to detect such launches from containers and will pose a threat if the launch is very close to the enemy's territory.[xii] The number of cargo ships traversing the vast oceans everyday with deadly missiles will make the existing detection of missile launches from satellites extremely difficult because the number of cargo ships is far more than the number of satellites.

But just like any other system, there are few limitations of this one as well. At first, these container ships are designed not to look like a naval vessel; hence, there won't be any radar detection of potential targets nor equipment to neutralize incoming threats like missiles etc. Secondly, loading weapons in civilian ships violates International Laws because it endangers civilian seafarers and puts all of them at risk.[xiii] The design of such containers should follow the International Maritime Organization Standardization & Compliance requirements which should be able to host a tactical ballistic missile without any issues. Other limitations can include the number of missiles to be stored, the training of the crew etc.[xiv]

Enhanced Second Strike capability:

Irrespective of the above, these missile container ships will definitely provide an enhanced Second-strike capability to the nuclear armed nations around the world. Apart from silo based ballistic missile launch and the submarine launched ballistic missile systems, these container ships also provide the same level of deception that's the key to launch a second strike in the event any state launches a nuclear attack. These will provide the hot launch which is desirable in case of a second strike capability rather than a cold launch which is the case with submarine launched ballistic missiles. The time difference in terms of submarine launched missiles vis a vis a surface launched ballistic missile is considerable. Hence this will also reduce the fuel consumption requirements of missiles to travel extra distance from the depths of the sea. Surface ships will have better command, control and communication which is desirable for effective second strike.

India's Development:

India follows a 'No First Use' Nuclear doctrine, which gives room for a second strike. But apart from submarine launched ballistic missile systems, India hasn't paid much attention towards the land-based silo systems unlike China, Russia or Western powers. The reasons are unknown. On the other hand, the cost and time to construct a SSBN is huge. Therefore, India can prefer the container ship-based deck-erector-launcher concept. The erector-launcher is derived from the existing Tractor-Erector-Launcher which is used for the land-based system. The erector launcher could be camouflaged as cargo.[xv] However much of these developments are still unknown or not in the public domain. If Indian policymakers do consider this option in future, it will lead to employment generation and create export potential to friendly allies.

Conclusion:

India has considerably developed its submarine launched ballistic missile capability. Hence the Land, Undersea and Air capability got completed giving rise to the 'Nuclear Triad'. The addition of container ship-based missile capability will give rise to the surface capability. The development of Agni Prime Ballistic missile with quasi ballistic trajectory will be an excellent container ship-based option. This can deter China in the Maritime domain and can enhance India's second-strike capability for land attack in future.

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[xii] Ray Song, Ibid.

[xiii] 'China Hides Secret Missile Systems In Cargo Containers', *Maritime Gateway,* 9 December 2021, https://www.maritimegateway.com/china-hides-secret-missile-systems-in-cargo-containers/

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Uploaded on : 14-07-2023