Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s political genius was on full display last week when, in a short TV address, he declared India’s emergence as the fourth nation to enter the elite space power club—along with the US, Russia and China—to have proofed capability to destroy targets in space. Describing the details of Mission Shakti—it lasted for three minutes, shooting down a satellite in low Earth orbit with a missile, 186 miles from Earth—Modi’s address was as dramatic as it was homey. The three messages of suraksha (military acumen), insaaf (development) and a reminder to the nation that the entire effort had been indigenous (Made in India). These are the three political mantras synonymous with BJP’s election messaging and crucial for its electoral success.

Modi detractors complained to the Election Commission that the address was a violation of the model code of conduct that prohibits incumbent governments from making policy announcements weeks before a general election. Herein lies the genius of Modi’s political messaging.

In his almost 10-minute address, Modi did not mention Pakistan, the Indian economy, the RBI, his name or his government even once. And yet his sheer announcement, and the media coverage that followed, not only drove nationalist fervor but also attempted to reinforce the belief among the electorate that the security and economic development of the nation is safe in the hands of the Modi government.

Unlike in the case of Balakot air strikes, Modi’s detractors did not ask for proof given that the technological achievement of Mission Shakti was offi- cially announced, the fact that India’s space power stands for peace and not as a threat to other military powers. As the only non-permanent member of the UN Security Council to be a space power, this commitment comes with important geopolitical implications.

But we should pause before trivialising the achievements of Indian space scientists—amongst the political hicking that followed the announcement, including comments from former staff of India’s defence and space research organisations that prior non-BJP governments lacked the political will to fund an anti-satellite (ASAT) system programme—and understand what Mission Shakti stands for. Modi’s message was less about demonstrating India’s capability to destroy targets in space and more about leveraging India’s technology to bolster national pride in the space domain.

A January 2019 US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report ‘Challenges to Security in Space’ highlights how Chinese and Russian governments reorganised their space military capabilities in 2015, developing jamming and cyber capabilities, directed energy weapons, on-orbit capabilities, and ground-based ASAT missiles as a means to reduce US and allied military effectiveness. The US military has thus been forced to make important strategic decisions, increasing the agility, precision and lethality of our military with lesser collateral damage. It is not surprising that Mission Shakti prompted Pakistan to urge the world to slam India, while China found itself to be ‘space-evangelical’.

Leadership in space will also help India develop indigenous technologies to resolute issues such as how we communicate, travel, farm, trade and educate, creating countless jobs. Modi did not forget to remind his electorate how the benefits of India’s constellation of satellites are being enjoyed by farmers, students, fishers, military forces, and why it is a moment of national pride now that we have an ASAT system.

But India is still not there. To harness the full military and commercial benefits of Mission Shakti, India needs to formally develop a ‘space force’ plan. Watch government departments should bear the responsibility to develop, coordinate and implement India’s national security space programme. There must be a mechanism of strategically syncing the needs of India’s defence and finance ministries with the aims and outputs of ISRO’s research.

Can we take a cue from US President Donald Trump’s efforts to develop a dedicated US Space Force? In February, Trump signed the Space Policy Directive-4, ordering the Pentagon to create a ‘Space Force’ as a new branch of US military, and earlier this month US defense secretary started the process of establishing a US Space Force that will centralise the US command and control structure for space war fighting, besides developing and implementing strategy, doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures for US armed forces to deter and defeat a generation of military threats in space.

Both Russia and China has revamped their military bureaucracy to provide for such space prowess. A leader inspires others to imagine beyond the capabilities of their immediate constituents. Did Modi help Indians re- imagine India’s military, commercial and geopolitical power in an increasingly confrontational domain of space? Only time will tell.