



# Aligning the triad

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## **Aligning the triad-INS Arihant's inaugural sea patrol must spark a debate on the state of India's nuclear deterrence**

- The INS Arihant, India's first nuclear ballistic missile submarine that completed its sea patrol earlier this month, will contribute significantly to making India's deterrence capability more robust.
- Submarine-based nuclear capability is the most survivable leg of a nuclear triad, and its benefit must be seen especially in the light of the growing naval capabilities of India's potential adversaries.
- In this light, certain questions need to be addressed on the third leg of India's nuclear triad, as well as major challenges for strategic stability in the southern Asian region.

### **Arihant's missing links**

- Without nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles on board an SSBN (ship submersible ballistic nuclear) such as INS Arihant, it might not be any more useful than an ordinary nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN).
- Second, even if INS Arihant had nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles on board, it is not clear what ranges they would cover.
- In other words, deterring India's adversaries using the naval leg of its nuclear forces is a work in progress at this point of time.
- Third, if indeed the objective of India's nuclear planners is to achieve seamless and continuous sea deterrence, one SSBN with limited range is far from sufficient.
- Maintaining a huge nuclear force and its ancillary systems, in particular the naval leg, would eventually prove to be extremely expensive.
- One way to address the costs would be to reduce the reliance on the air and land legs of the nuclear triad.
- While this might bring down costs without sacrificing the country's deterrence requirements, inter-service claims might frustrate such plans.
- As a matter of fact, communicating with SSBNs without being

intercepted by the adversaries' tracking systems while the submarines navigate deep and far-flung waters is among the most difficult challenges in maintaining an SSBN fleet.

### **Impact on strategic stability**

- INS Arihant's induction will also have implications for regional stability.
- For one, it is bound to make the maritime competition in the Indian Ocean region sharper.
- Adding to this China's mega infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, with its ambitious maritime objectives; and the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, with India, U.S., Japan, and Australia.
- This sharpening of the maritime competition further engenders several regional 'security dilemmas' wherein what a state does to secure itself could end up making it more insecure.
- However, once the three key players in this trilemma — China, India and Pakistan — manage to put in place the essential conditions for credible minimum deterrence, the effect of the instability could potentially decrease.
- What would further complicate the relations among the three key players in the region is the absence of nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs) among them.
- In the maritime sphere, neither pairs have any CBMs.
- It is therefore important for India and Pakistan (as also India and China) to have an 'incidents at sea' agreement like the one between the U.S. and USSR in 1972, so as to avoid incidents at sea and avoid their escalation if they took place.

### **Command and control**

- India's sea deterrent also throws up several key questions about the country's nuclear command and control systems.
- In sum, while INS Arihant makes India's nuclear deterrence more robust, it also changes deterrence stability in the southern Asian region as we know it.
- More so, it is important to remember that the country's sea deterrent is still in its infancy, and its path hereon is riddled with challenges.