



Unnecessary, destabilising and expensive

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Unnecessary, destabilising and expensive-The pursuit of nuclear-armed submarines reflects a security assessment that is becoming increasingly irrelevant

- A nuclear submarine is fuelled by an onboard nuclear reactor, which allows it to operate underwater for long periods of time.
- In contrast, a conventional diesel submarine uses batteries to operate underwater, but is forced to surface periodically to recharge its batteries using diesel-combustion engines that require oxygen.
- Strategic Submarine Ballistic Nuclear(SSBN) were first deployed during the Cold War and justified as a tool of last resort.
- If an adversary were to launch a devastating first-strike on a country, destroying its land-based missiles and paralysing its air force, the submarine — undetected at sea — could still deliver a counter-strike, assuring the “mutual destruction” of both countries.

Indian context

- However, this strategic function makes little sense in the modern Indian context..
- There is no realistic threat, which the Arihant could counter, that could wipe out India’s existing nuclear deterrent.
- The range of the missiles carried by the Arihant is about 750 km, and so it can only target Pakistan and perhaps China.
- The Pakistan government has threatened to use “tactical nuclear weapons” to counter India’s cold-start doctrine that envisions a limited invasion of Pakistan.
- China has consistently pledged, for more than 50 years, that it will never be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict.
- Even if China were to suddenly change its policy, any attempt to disable India’s nuclear weapons would be fraught with unacceptable risks regardless of whether India possesses SSBNs.

Some risks

- In fact, nuclear-armed submarines increase the risks of an accidental conflict.
- Traditionally, nuclear weapons in India have been kept under civilian control, and separate from their delivery systems.
- However, the crew of a nuclear-armed submarine will have both the custody of nuclear weapons and the ability to launch them at short notice.
- Even though reports suggest that nuclear weapons on Indian SSBNs will be safeguarded by electronic switches, called “permissive action links”, such a setup can dangerously weaken the civilian command-and-control structure, as declassified documents from the Cuban missile crisis show.

Prohibitive costs

- Given its uncertain, and even adverse, impact on the country’s security, it is especially important to examine the costs of the SSBN programme.
- Media reports suggest that the Indian Navy would eventually like about four SSBNs.
- The government has not released precise figures, but the international experience can be used to estimate the costs of such a fleet.
- The Indian submarines will be smaller, and perhaps cheaper.
- However, even if their costs are only half as large as the lower end of the British and American estimates, the total cost of maintaining a fleet of four SSBNs, over a 40-year life cycle, will be at least Rs.3 lakh crore.
- It is senseless to spend this money on nuclear submarines when thousands of lives are lost each year because the state pleads that it lacks resources for basic health care and nutrition.

