

SEA CHANGE

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Recreating the classic 'mohalle ki Diwali' on Digital?

On Monday, India achieved a significant milestone in its strategic nuclear posture when it announced the completion of its survivable nuclear triad by adding maritime strike capability to land and air-based delivery platforms for nuclear weapons. With the country's first nuclear ballistic missile submarine, INS Arihant, completing its maiden "deterrence" patrol, India joined the select group of five — US, Russia, China, France and UK — which can boast of this capability.

A deterrence patrol, as the term signifies, is meant to deter the adversary from conducting the first nuclear strike, as a nuclear ballistic missile submarine provides India with an assured second-strike capability. While land-based and air-based delivery systems are easier to track, seek and destroy, a SSBN can stay undetected at sea for a long duration, assuring a nuclear retaliation against the adversary. An assured second-strike capability also allows India not to promise a No First Use of nuclear weapons in the case of any conflict. Part of India's nuclear doctrine, it is meant to be a major safeguard against any nuclear misadventure, particularly by Pakistan. Over the past three decades, Pakistan has ostensibly supported terrorism in India under the shadow of a nuclear umbrella, which makes a conventional war a rather risky option for India. While the prime minister assured that India "remains committed to the doctrine of Credible Minimum Deterrence and No First Use," he also warned Pakistan without naming the country that "the success of INS Arihant gives a fitting response to those who indulge in nuclear blackmail".

As we acknowledge this achievement, there is a need to step back and appraise the challenges that lie ahead. The command and control structures for an SSBN on a fully-loaded deterrence patrol have to be robust and fool-proof, for an inadvertent error can lead to mass destruction. Also, the range of missiles on-board INS Arihant are no match for the range of Chinese missiles. INS Arihant, which is an indigenously developed submarine and part of a supposedly five-submarine project, was in the making for more than two decades as a classified programme, directly under the PM. Designed in the 1990s, the INS Arihant development project was officially acknowledged in 1998 and the submarine was launched in 2009. The nuclear reactor of the submarine went critical in 2013 and it was commissioned three years later. As the country looks in satisfaction at INS Arihant's maiden deterrence patrol, it must celebrate the hard yards put in the past to ensure India's strategic independence.

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