

Nuclear breakthrough for the Indian navy?

Written by David Scott

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DAVID SCOTT, JUL 27 2009

July 26 2009 saw a milestone reached by the Indian navy at Vishakapatnam, their eastern Command centre, as Prime Minister Manmohan Singh formally launched India's own domestically produced 6,000 ton nuclear powered submarine, *INS Arihant*. This submarine was part of India's Advanced Technology Vessels (ATV) programme, and had taken over a decade to complete. *INS Arihant*, with its 85-megawatt nuclear reactor, will now undergo two years of sea trials in the Bay of Bengal, before being commissioned and deployed into full service. Four more ATV nuclear powered submarines are due for construction over the coming years. It has long been seen as an important event. At the start of the decade, Indian analysts like Sakhuja were noting that "Indian naval strategists and naval planners are convinced that acquisition of a nuclear submarine will provide the most reliable deterrence", will "give the navy a true blue water status" and will "add to great power status" for India.[i] Has this moment arrived, will this be achieved with the launching of *INS Arihant*?

Significance of the launch

In building such a vessel, India has indeed joined an elite club of major powers able to construct such weapons. As Manmohan Singh put it, "today's launch is a reflection of the immense technical expertise that exists in our country ... today we join a select group of five nations who possess the capability to build a nuclear-powered submarine"; i.e. the five Permanent Members of the UN Security, the USA, Russia, UK, France and China.[ii] As such, India's nuclear submarine announces India's arrival, or at least its potential, as a technological and military power to be reckoned with. It also acts as a general status symbol, greater Great Power credibility for India.

The nuclear submarine is also set to play a vital and specific role within India's nuclear deterrent. The 6,000-ton vessel will be armed with 12 nuclear-armed *Sagarika* K-15 SLBM (Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile), which have a 700 km-range, and which were successfully tested in 2008. These will then be replaced later by a SLBM variant of the 3,500 km range *Agni-III* missile. This will ensure India's *nuclear triad* capability on land, air and now at sea. India's land and air nuclear deterrent are vulnerable to attack, whereas the less detectable submarine capacity will be more difficult to track, and so gives India the nuclear security she has long sought.

INS Arihant literally means "Destroyer of Enemies", which raises the question, which enemy? In reality such nuclear powered submarine capacity is not particularly needed by India with regard to Pakistan. In reality such technology points to India bigger neighbour, and it was no coincidence that speculation inside and outside India was that its construction was China-related. Chinese sources themselves immediately picked up on its arrival, and were ready to cite Indian commentators like Bhaskar that such actions by India were a "counter to China".[iii] China's strategic encirclement of India has long been a growing threat, denied by China but perceived as such by India, amidst their wider Great Power rivalries across the Asia-Pacific.[iv] China's naval build up of nuclear powered submarine strength at Sanya base on Hainan Island, bringing Chinese forces closer to the Strait of Malacca and Indian Ocean, raised Indian concerns in 2008.[v] To some extent, India has tried countering this through her own active naval deployment into Southeast Asia and the western Pacific, alongside Japan and the United States.[vi] India can now consider deploying her own missile launch capability through stationing *INS Arihant* in the Bay of Bengal, or South China Sea. *INS Arihant* can help block potential Chinese incursion into the Indian Ocean through the key choke point in the east – the Strait of Malacca, guarded by India's FENC Far Eastern Naval command at Port Blair on the Andaman Islands.

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Naval growth for India

The launch of the submarine takes place within India's wider growing naval capacity, and drive for a blue water navy that can project seapower and pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean.[vii] This is a high tech drive, reflecting Manmohan's Singh's rhetoric at the submarine launch that "we will continue to render all support to the constant modernisation of our armed forces and to ensuring that they remain at the cutting edge of technology". A multi-level modernisation programme has been underway during this decade, under both BJP and Congress administrations, and this has already brought about a strengthening of the Indian navy. Such government support is enabling the naval establishment's advocacy of what it called in its 2004 publically released *Indian Naval Doctrine*, "a maritime vision ... to fulfil our maritime destiny".[viii] With regard to nuclear submarines, two Akula-class nuclear submarines are due to be transferred from Russia to India during 2009 and 2010 on ten-year leases, by which time more indigenously produced ATV nuclear submarines should be joining the Indian Navy. Long term stealth submarine purchase (Scorpenes for 2012 onwards and so forth) and indigenous construction are also coming into play under Projects 75 and 76; entailing a total addition of 24 underwater vessels in the next decade. The long running saga of the Gorshkov aircraft carrier should be resolved when its final transfer from Russia takes place in December 2012, to be renamed as *INS Vikramaditya*. Meanwhile, India's own construction of aircraft carriers has commenced, the keel of the first *Indigenous Aircraft Carrier* (IAC) was laid in 2005, with completion envisaged by 2012. Project 15-A Kolkata-class destroyers and Project 17 Shivalik class stealth frigates are bringing advanced powerful ships into the Indian Navy. The Indian navy is envisaged by its planners as rising by 2022 to a 160-plus ship navy, including three aircraft carriers, 60 major combatants, including submarines and close to 400 aircraft of different types.

There remain problems and limitations with India's naval rise. Her nuclear submarines will need testing and delicate adjustments in their lengthy sea trials, the Gorshkov saga is still to be finished, Indian indigenous production plans for 38 new ships are ambitious but could well be subject to overrun costs and slower than expected completion. There may be a mismatch emerging between Indian ambitions and capabilities in the Indian Ocean and vis-à-vis other rivals like China.[ix] China's own plans for naval expansion could outstrip India's, both in submarines (where China already has superiority over India) and envisaged aircraft carrier construction, and bring China even more into the Indian Ocean.

Conclusions

Nevertheless, if one compares India's situation with that of twenty years ago, when it had a languishing sidelined and ageing navy; the Indian navy for the second decade of this twenty-first century presents a very different picture. Its strategic role has been recognised at the highest levels.[x] Rising budget allocations, indigenous production and foreign purchasing has transformed the Indian navy. It is now a fighting machine, experienced in wide ranging deployment throughout the Indian Ocean; and indeed beyond into the western Pacific and South China Sea in one direction, and into the eastern Mediterranean and southern Atlantic in another. This is a blue water navy, within which the new and growing nuclear submarine element represented by *INS Arihant* can nestle. China will be particularly following this development with interest, and a degree of concern.

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NOTES

[i] Vijay Sakhuja, 'Sea-based Deterrence and Indian Security,' *Strategic Analysis*, 25.1, 2001, 21-32, 31.

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[ii] Singh extracts in 'India has No Aggressive Design, Says PM', *Times of India*, 26 July, 2009.

[iii] 'India Launches its 1st Nuclear-Powered Submarine', *China Daily*, 27 July 2009. Also 'India Launches First Indigenous Built Nuclear Attack Submarine', *Xinhua*, 26 July 2009;

[iv] See David Scott, 'The Great Power "Great Game" between China and India – the "logic of geography"', *Geopolitics*, 13.1, Jan. 2008, 1-26; Iskander Rehman, 'Keeping the Dragon at Bay: India's Counter-Containment of China in Asia', *Asian Security*, 5.2, May-August 2009.

[v] Rajat Pandit, 'India Worried About China's Growing N-Sub Prowess', *Times of India*, May 6, 2008.

[vi] Scott, 'Strategic Imperatives of India as an Emerging Player in Pacific Asia', *International Studies*, 44.2, 2007, 123-40; Harsh Pant, 'India in the Asia-Pacific: Rising Ambitions With an Eye on China', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 14.1, 2007, 54-71; Walter Ladwig, 'Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, "Look East", and China's Emerging Influence in the Asia Pacific', *Asian Security*, 5.2, 2009, 87-113.

[vii] Donald Berlin, 'India in the Indian Ocean', *Naval College War Review*, 59.2, 2006, 58-89; Scott, 'Indian "Footprints" in the Indian Ocean: Power Projection for the 21st Century', *Indian Ocean Survey*, 2.2, 2006, 1-26; Scott, 'India's "Grand Strategy" for the Indian Ocean: Mahanian visions', *Asia-Pacific Review*, 13.2, 2006, 97-129; Scott, 'India's Drive for a "Blue Water" Navy', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, 10.2, 2007-8, 1-42.

[viii] Forward by Arun Prakash, its then Naval Commander in Chief.

[ix] Cautions here by Harsh Pant, 'India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch Between Ambition and Capabilities', *Pacific Affairs*, 82.2, 2009, 279-297.

[x] Pranab Mukherjee, 'International Relations and Maritime Affairs – Strategic Imperatives,' 30 June 2007, <http://meaindia.nic.in/speech/2007/06/29ss01.htm>.

About the author:

David Scott is a member and writer at the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC). He has written widely on two broad fronts; firstly Indo-Pacific security issues with particular regard to Indian and Chinese foreign policy, secondly Buddhism, as a current feature of Indian and Chinese diplomacy and historically within East-West Encounters.