

India's Nuclear Submarine Adventure Begins Anew

Written by Harsh V. Pant

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HARSH V. PANT, FEB 4 2012

The Indian Navy has taken command from Russia of the nation's first nuclear-powered submarine since India's last such vessel was decommissioned in 1991. With the commissioning of the Russian Akula-II class submarine 'K-152' Nerpa – now known as INS Chakra – India becomes the world's sixth nation to operate a nuclear powered submarine. The \$900-million contract for INS Chakra was signed in a rather secretive manner in 2004 and the vessel was due to be handed over to India in 2009, but the project has been beset with problems. It took a few mistrials, a major accident in 2008 and a lot of diplomatic back and forth before New Delhi could take control of the 8140-ton submarine from Russia on a 10-year lease last week. The Russians started building the Nerpa in 1991 but the collapse of Soviet Union led to economic problems for the project. India invested in the projected, injecting a fresh flow of funds in lieu of a lease. Negotiations are ongoing for the leasing of second nuclear submarine from Russia.

That the Indian Navy has had its eyes on nuclear submarines has been no secret. Nuclear submarines have some inherent strengths that make them a critical part of a nation's naval profile. They can go deeper and faster and can spend lengthy times at sea. As India's naval prowess has grown in recent years, the need for nuclear submarines has been articulated by Indian naval planners and policy-makers alike.

INS Chakra does not really add to India's nuclear muscle as it won't be armed with long-range nuclear missiles. For that, the Navy is still waiting for INS Arihant, an indigenous nuclear submarine, which is undergoing sea trials and is slated to become fully operational by early 2013. INS Arihant was formally launched by the Indian Prime Minister in 2009. This highly secretive project took more than a decade to complete and will complete India's nuclear triad, with the submarine's ballistic missiles giving India a second strike capability.

What INS Chakra will do is to restore some muscle to India's underwater combat capability, which has been steadily depleting with only 14 conventional submarines holding forth. The Indian Navy has also lost critical expertise in maintaining and operating nuclear submarines and INS Chakra is expected to be used for training sailors as well. India had leased a Russian Charlie class nuclear submarine from the former Soviet Union in 1988 for three years. It was given to India with a condition that it should not be used in war. Since its decommissioning in 1991, India has found it difficult to build on and expand its nuclear submarine expertise. The Indian Navy, therefore, hopes that INS Chakra will help its personnel by providing them with expertise in handling such vessels as well as putting in place an infrastructure for future development.

Indian naval planners are looking at nuclear attack submarines as an important element of their 'denial strategy' (aiming to deny opponents' ability to use the sea, but without seeking to control it themselves), and as a response to adversary's 'sea control' strategy. Not only does a nuclear submarine enhance India's credibility as a major global military power, it is also seen as crucial in cementing Indian Navy's blue-water status.

The deployment of a nuclear-powered submarine is seen as critical for the Indian Navy as it remains anxious to maintain its presence in the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, especially in light of China's massive naval build-up. Beijing already has a fleet of eight nuclear submarines and India is struggling to catch up. Indian naval expansion is being undertaken with an eye on China, and Chakra notwithstanding, India has nautical miles to go before it can catch up with its powerful neighbor, which has made some significant advances in the waters surrounding India.

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With a rise in China's economic and political prowess, there has also been a commensurate growth in its profile in the Indian Ocean region. China is acquiring naval facilities along the crucial choke-points in the regional waterways, not only to serve its economic interests but also to enhance its strategic presence in the region. Given the immense geographical advantages that India enjoys in the Indian Ocean, China will find it challenging to exert as much sway in the region as India possibly can. But all the steps that China is taking to protect and enhance its interests in the region are generating apprehensions in India about Beijing's real intentions. Many in India argue China is seeking to prevent New Delhi from being able to project power and maintain a credible naval presence in these crucial waterways. This is happening during a period when Sino-Indian distrust is already at an all time high.

The critics have argued that at a time when the US already has ninth generation nuclear-powered submarines, Russian nuclear submarine technology of first and second generation vintage offers little strategic heft to India. Nonetheless, there is a symbolism attached to being able to operate a nuclear submarine and the acquisition of the Akula-II class nuclear attack submarine is bound to raise the Indian Navy's profile in the region and beyond.

Though many in India would like the Indian Navy to move beyond leasing to self-reliance in submarine technology, it is not entirely clear if that's achievable in the short to medium term given the parlous state of India's indigenous defence industrial base. India's indigenous defence production has been marred by serious technical and organisational problems, leading to significant delays in the development of key defence technologies and platforms. The Indian Navy, much like the other two services, has found it difficult to translate its conceptual commitment to self-reliance and indigenization into actionable policy, resulting in a perpetuation of reliance on external sources for naval modernization. India will continue to rely on external partners to enhance its naval profile in the foreseeable future and INS Chakra is just a first step.

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