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## Aligning the triad: On India's nuclear deterrence

### Context:-

- The **INS Arihant**, *India's first nuclear ballistic missile submarine* 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.
- But there are certain challenges on the third leg of India's nuclear triad that need to be addressed.

### Challenges Associated with INS Arihant:-

- **Limited Range Issue-** INS Arihant had the 750 km range K-15 missiles on board, which is insufficient to reach key targets in, say, China or Pakistan unless it gets close to their waters, which would then make the Indian SSBN a target.
  - While the K-4 missile (3,500 km range) currently under development would give the country's sea deterrent the necessary range vis-à-vis its adversaries, INS Arihant would not be able to carry them on board. The Navy would require bigger SSBNs (S-4 and S-5) to carry the K-4 ballistic missiles.

- **Feasibility of seamless and continuous sea deterrence** - Given the adversaries' capabilities in tracking, monitoring and surveilling India's SSBNs, it would need to invest in at least four such submarines more.
  - Maintaining a huge nuclear force and its ancillary systems, in particular the naval leg, would eventually prove to be extremely expensive.
- **Issue of Command and Control-**
  - **Communication Issue** - 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.
  - **Issue of Nuclear Warhead under Military Control-** In the case of the air or land legs of the triad where civilian organisations have the custody of nuclear warheads, the naval leg will be essentially under military custody and control given that there would be no civilian presence on board an SSBN. Though there is civilian control through electronic switches '**Permissive Action Links**', but again communication issue surfaced.
  - Until such sophisticated communication systems are eventually put in place, India will have to do with shallower waters or focus on bastion control, which in some ways reduces the deterrence effect of SSBNs, as bastions would be closer to the ports..

- **Issue of Strategic stability of Indian Ocean-** INS Arihant's induction will also have implications for regional stability.
- **Sharpening of the Maritime Competition-** INS Arihant is a response to the Chinese naval build-up, as Chinese nuclear-powered submarines (reportedly without nuclear weapons on board) have been frequenting the Indian Ocean on anti-piracy missions, creating unease in New Delhi.
  - Pakistan's reaction to India's response to China would be to speed up its submarine-building spree, with assistance from Beijing.
  - Add to this mix 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.
  - **Regional 'security dilemmas'**- Where one security measure is seen as insecurity for other, this will promote arm race may result into heightened instability for the foreseeable future.
  - 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.

- But it's a long road to such an outcome as there is absence of **nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs)** among them. While India and Pakistan have only rudimentary nuclear CBMs between them, India and China have none at all.
- 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.

**Way Ahead:-**

- While INS Arihant makes India's nuclear deterrence more robust, it also changes deterrence stability in the southern Asian region as we know it.
- Country's sea deterrent is still in its infancy, and its path hereon is riddled with challenges.
- 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.

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