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New Delhi's Secret "Black Project": India's Nuclear Weapons Program

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If there was any arms race in the region, India has won it, at whatever the cost may be. But the claims to have good neighbourly relations, with MFN-status, no-war pact or no-first-use nuclear arsenal are just a dream seemingly never to come true.

In April this year India yanked open the door of the exclusive ICBM (International Ballistic Missile) club with the first test of Agni-V. Now, if DRDO is to be believed, India has quietly gate-crashed into an even more exclusive club of nuclear-tipped submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). The most ironic part of this achievement on part of India is that New Delhi had been able to successfully keep it as a secret 'black project'.

The annual awards function of the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) the other day witnessed Prime Minister Manmohan Singh handing over the "technology leadership award" to a scientist, A K Chakrabarti, of the Hyderabad-based DRDL lab, for the "successful development" of the country's first SLBM. This capability has been acquired only by four nations, the US, Russia, France and China.

Long shrouded in secrecy as a "black project", unlike the surface-to-surface nuclear missiles like Agni, the SLBM may now finally come out of the closet. Called different names at different

developmental phases, which included ``Sagarika" for an extended period, the SLBM in question is the 'K-15' missile with a 750-km strike range. Much like the over 5,000-km Agni-V that will be fully operational by 2015 after four-to-five "repeatable tests", the K-15 is also still some distance away from being deployed. While the SLBM may be fully-ready and undergoing production now, as DRDO contends after conducting its test several times from submersible pontoons, its carrier INS Arihant will take at least a year before it's ready for "deterrent patrols".

India's first indigenous nuclear-powered submarine, the 6,000-tonne INS Arihant, is still undergoing "harbor-acceptance trials" with all its pipelines being cleared and tested meticulously on shore-based steam before its miniature 83 MW pressurized light-water reactor goes "critical". The submarine will then undergo extensive "sea-acceptance trials" and test-fire the 10-tonne K-15, which can carry a one-tonne nuclear payload, from the missile silos on its hump.

Only then will India's missing third leg of the nuclear triad - the ability to fire nukes from land, air and sea - be in place. INS Arihant has four silos on its hump to carry either 12 K-15s or four of the 3,500-km range K-4 missiles undergoing tests at the moment. The first two legs revolve around the Agni missiles and fighters like Sukhoi-30MKIs and Mirage-2000s jury-rigged to deliver nuclear warheads.

The sea-based nuclear leg in the shape of SLBMs is much more effective — as also survivable being relatively immune to pre-emptive strikes — than the air or land ones. Nuclear-powered submarines, which are capable of operating silently underwater for months at end, armed with nuclear-tipped missiles are, therefore, considered the most potent and credible leg of the triad. With even the US and Russia ensuring that two-thirds of the strategic warheads they eventually retain under arms reduction agreements will be SLBMs, India with a clear "no-first use" nuclear doctrine needs such survivable second-strike capability to achieve credible strategic deterrence.