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India's elusive nuclear triad will be operational soon: Navy chief

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NEW DELHI: India's nuclear triad - the ability to fire nukes from land, air and sea - will soon be in place. After some delays and hiccups, the country's first nuclear submarine INS Arihant is getting ready "to go to sea" within the next few months.

"INS Arihant is steadily progressing towards becoming operational...we are pretty close to putting it to sea (for extensive trials and missile firings)," announced Navy chief Admiral Nirmal Verma on Tuesday.

"Navy is poised to complete the triad, and our maritime and nuclear doctrines will then be aligned to ensure our nuclear insurance comes from the sea. Given our unequivocal 'no first-use commitment', a retaliatory strike capability that is credible and invulnerable is an imperative," he added.

The Navy chief's emphatic statement comes a week after DRDO officially declared the country's first-ever SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) or the K-15 missile, with a strike range of 750-km, was "ready for induction".

India has for some time possessed the Agni series of ballistic missiles as well as fighter-bombers to constitute the land and air-based legs of the triad. The long-elusive underwater leg, considered

the most effective for both pre-emptive as well as retaliatory strikes, now finally seems to be taking shape with INS Arihant and its two follow-on SSBNs (nuclear-powered submarines armed with ballistic nuclear-tipped missiles).

The 6,000-tonne submarine, which has four missile silos on its hump to carry either 12 K-15s or four of the under-development 3,500-km range K-4 missiles, will head for sea only after its 83 MW pressurized light-water reactor goes "critical". So far, it has been undergoing systematic checks of all its sub-systems as well as "harbour-acceptance trials" on shore-based steam at Vizag.

With 46 warships and submarines being constructed, and another 49 in the pipeline under overall plans worth Rs 2.73 lakh crore, Admiral Verma said, "Today, I am confident we do not suffer asymmetries with anyone. We have the wherewithal to defend our maritime interests."

Brushing aside questions on the new US strategy to "rebalance" forces towards the Asia-Pacific as well as China's growing maritime might and assertiveness, the Navy chief said India's "primary" area of strategic interest lay between the Gulf and Malacca Strait, extending "down south to the Cape of Good Hope".

While India is not going to "actively deploy" in the contentious South China Sea, where China is enmeshed in territorial disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines and others, he said "all the players" there should ensure hostilities do not erupt in the region and hit global shipping and trade.

Turning to maritime terrorism, Admiral Verma said both the Navy and Coast Guard were now much better prepared and equipped to tackle 26/11-like attacks from outfits like Lashkar-e-Taiba. "Even before Abu Jundal (key 26/11 handler) said it, we had factored in such possibilities," he said.

"Terrorism from the sea and terrorism at sea are now realities of our times. In our external environment, one of our core concerns is the coalescing of the 'state' with 'non-state' entities," he added.