

INDIA'S

RECESSED TO OPERATIONAL NUCLEAR POSTURE:

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH ASIAN STABILITY



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The Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS) Islamabad conducts original policy research, analyses, and strategic outreach, and aims to highlight evolving regional and global strategic issues to promote peace and stability. This STRAT View analyzes the Indian changing nuclear posture and its implications on Regional Stability.

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INTRODUCTION

According to SIPRI's latest assessment, India's nuclear stockpile[1] has increased in the past year from 180 to 190 warheads. A more significant development pointed out by the SIPRI report is that India has almost 12 nuclear warheads in a state of deployment.[2] This assessment is based on India's placement of its missile in canister and conducting sea-based deterrence patrols. However, this change would mark a shift in India's deterrence posture from recessed deterrence towards a more operationally deployed force. This change can have implications for India-Pak nuclear dyad as it can incentivize Pakistan to adopt similar measures.

This article analyzes the potential change in India's nuclear posture, the expanding capability of India to deploy a large number of nuclear warheads and what can be possible steps for Pakistan to take for maintaining stability in the region.

EXPANDING INDIAN NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES

India is expanding its nuclear capabilities by modernizing all three of its nuclear forces – land, air, and sea. New Delhi is enhancing its second-strike capabilities as it has inducted[3] its third SSBN – INS Aridhaman – and is working on the fourth that would enter into service by 2027 – INS Arisudan.[4] The development of three SSBNs have provided India with the capability to conduct continuous at-sea deterrence mission.[5]

This also means that India would be having nuclear missiles on at least one of its submarines in a continuous deployment position, a condition that would only increase the number of deployed warheads.

Further, India is also inducting 3500km range K4 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) for deployment on INS Arighat and INS Aridhaman.[6] Currently, India's first submarine INS Arihant can carry 12 smaller 750km range K15 SLBMs in its 4 tubes – an explanation for why SIPRI placed the number of deployed warheads at a conservative estimate of twelve.

However, the newer Indian submarines can carry 24 K15 SLBMs that would double the deployed Indian nuclear warheads.

Moreover, if India has decided to change its nuclear posture by moving towards an operationally deployed nuclear arsenal, it can also deploy nuclear weapons on its land-based delivery vehicles too.

India is also expanding its nuclear missile programme with a particular focus on long-range system Agni-V. Recently, India again[7] conducted tests of its Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV), capable Agni-V missile that can store nuclear warheads in canisterized form.[8] Moreover, India also has Agni-P nuclear missile that can store nuclear warheads in canisterized form once operationalized.[9]

These developments points towards a broader shift in Indian nuclear posture from recessed deterrence to operational deterrence.

However, as India is keeping a part of its nuclear arsenal in deployed form – warheads mated with delivery vehicles especially for its land-based and sea-based forces – the shift would have implications for the India-Pak nuclear dyad.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENT TYPES OF NUCLEAR POSTURES[10]

Posture Type	Readiness Level	Weapon Configuration	Launch Timelines	Examples
Hair Trigger (Launch-on Warning)	Maximum Readiness	Warheads are mated to missiles; kept on continuous high alert	Minutes	US and Russia
Operational Deployment	High Readiness	A portion of warheads mated to missiles	Minutes to Hours	India, France, UK and North Korea
Recessed Deterrence	Low Readiness	Warheads are disassembled and stored separately from delivery vehicles	Days to Weeks	Pakistan

INDIAN CAPABILITY TO DEPLOY NUCLEAR WARHEADS

According to latest SIPRI report, India currently has 190 nuclear warheads. However, India's fissile material inventory provides it with a substantial concealed capacity for future arsenal expansion. According to latest SIPRI's estimates, India possesses approximately 12 tonnes of separated plutonium and 6 tonnes of highly enriched uranium (HEU), amounting to a combined stockpile of around 18 tonnes of fissile material.[11] .

Assuming complete diversion and efficient weaponization, this quantity of fissile material could support the production of several thousand nuclear warheads, depending on weapons design and fissile material requirements.[12]

Nevertheless, the existence of a large unsafeguarded fissile material base underscores India's significant nuclear hedge and its capacity for rapid long-term arsenal expansion should its strategic calculus change.

HOW MANY WARHEAD CAN INDIA DEPLOY CURRENTLY?

If we do rough estimates of Indian capability to deploy warheads based on its current known nuclear arsenal the number can it can be somewhere between 48 to 72 warheads. Currently, India has only Agni-V land-based canisterized missile that can operationally deploy warheads in peacetime. As it is a MIRV capable missile, according to SIPRI estimates it can deploy a total of 24 warheads across 8 launchers.

Because of MIRV capability, one missile can carry at least 3 nuclear warheads at one time. Similarly, Indian SSBNs INS Arihant and INS Arighat can deploy 12 nuclear capable K-15 missiles at one time. This brings a total number to 48 warheads.

In fact, INS Aridhaman can deploy 24 K-15 missile, double the size of previous two boats. At one time, according to the current capability, India can deploy a total of 72 nuclear warheads.

With further nuclear submarines and deployment of canisterized Agni-P in pipeline, this number can further increase over the years. However, this does not mean India has currently 72 warheads deployed but it does have the capacity and capability to do that if it chose.

TABLE 2: CURRENT INDIAN CAPABILITY TO DEPLOY NUCLEAR WARHEADS (AUTHORS COMPILATION BASED ON SIPRI ASSESSMENT)

Delivery Platform	Lauch Tubes/ Launchers	Short Range K-15 Missile/ Agni-V	Operational Status
INS Arihant (SSBN)	4	12 Missile/12 Warheads (3 Missile Per Tube)	Fully Operational
INS Arighat (SSBN)	4	12 Missiles/12 Warheads (3 missile per tube)	Fully Operational
INS Aridhaman (SSBN)	8	24 Missiles/24 Warheads (3 missile per tube)	Fully Operational
Agni-V	8	8 Missiles/24 Warheads (3 MIRV warheads)	Fully Operational

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL STABILITY

A shift in Indian nuclear posture from recessed deterrence to operational deterrence can lead to counter-measures from Pakistan for strengthening the credibility and survivability of its nuclear forces. The region is replete with nuclear crises and Kashmir being a nuclear flashpoint remains a point of concern.[13] In May 2025, India and Pakistan were engaged in the most serious crisis since the region's nuclearization in 1998.[14]

For the first time,[15] the two nuclear armed countries conducted missile strikes on each other's territories. The increasingly perilous regional situation is further heightened by perceptions regarding Indian nuclear doctrine.

There has been an increasing belief that India is moving towards a first-strike counterforce doctrine.[16]

A change in Indian nuclear posture can have serious risks regarding crisis stability in South Asia. First, an operational Indian nuclear posture can reduce decision-making timelines and incentivize Pakistan to adopt higher-alert postures during crises, increasing the risks of early nuclear escalation.

Second, operational deployment introduces a "use-it-or-lose-it" dilemma in the region. Given Indian counterforce temptations complimented by an operational nuclear posture can heighten the dilemma in Pakistan during a crisis.

Pakistan can contemplate about launch-on-warning protocol to further enhance the credibility of its deterrent. Such action-reaction dynamics risk creating a regional security dilemma ultimately leading to higher readiness levels, greater nuclear deployment, and stressed crisis stability.

Moreover, there is lack of communication and increasing mistrust between the two states, which make any change in nuclear posture an added danger.

Third, deployed sea-based nuclear forces increase the possibility of inadvertent escalation. In a future India-Pakistan conflict, anti-

submarine warfare operations directed against a nuclear-capable submarine – even if undertaken for conventional military purposes – could be interpreted as an attempt to neutralize an adversary's second-strike capability. Fourth, the risks associated with accidental, incidental, or unauthorized launches become more acute when nuclear warheads are operationally deployed.

Finally, sea-based deterrence raises complex command-and-control challenges. Unlike land-based nuclear forces, submarines on deterrent patrols cannot always maintain uninterrupted communication with national leadership.

As India expands the operational role of its SSBN fleet, questions regarding communication reliability, launch authorization procedures, and the potential delegation of nuclear authority become increasingly relevant. In a fast-moving crisis, communication disruptions, misperceptions, or uncertainty regarding political intent could further complicate escalation management.

In short India's change of nuclear posture from recessed deterrence to operational deterrence has implications for crisis stability and arms race stability in the region. This development can have serious consequences for South Asia's nuclear landscape. It can create new pathways for both advertent and inadvertent escalation in the region.

Moreover, non-nuclear strategic weapons and dual-capable systems like BrahMos are increasing conventional-nuclear entanglement in the region. India has already deployed BrahMos against Pakistan in the May 2025 crisis. In an environment, where timelines are already very short, conventional-nuclear ambiguity especially when states have mated and operationally ready nuclear posture can sharply increase the risks of nuclear use.

Sixth, this can increase the risks of an arms race in the region. India's vertical proliferation of its nuclear arsenal and an increase in delivery vehicles can increase measures on Pakistan's part too.

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