

India has assured second-strike capability: Chief Naval Admiral Sunil Lanba

Manu Pubby

The Rafale controversy will have no bearing on the Indian Navy's quest for 57 new fighter jets, said Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Sunil Lanba. He said India is keeping an eye and "doing its bit" to tackle the increased Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region. Lanba spoke with Manu Pubby as 32 member-nations and observers of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium gather in Kochi to mark its tenth anniversary. Excerpts:

How significant is the announced deterrence patrol of the INS Arihant nuclear missile submarine?

The PM has said it all and the only thing that I can say is that we have now demonstrated the sea vectors capability by doing the deterrence patrol. Our nuclear policy is of 'no first use' and the deterrence patrol has demonstrated that you have an assured second-strike capability.

There have been reports of increased Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean Region. How is this being countered by the Indian Navy?

Operationally at sea, the mission-based deployments, which we have been doing for over a year, have ensured that the entry and exit routes of the Indian Ocean Region—the choke points—are all being monitored. We have permanent presence now in many parts including the Malacca Strait, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea as well as the Bay of Bengal. So, our domain awareness has improved.

Have we been monitoring the presence of these assets in our region?

All deployments of Peoples Liberation Army (Navy) ships and submarines are being monitored. They are always being welcomed by us when they enter the region, so we know what is happening. India does not have the deep pockets that China has—they have spent a lot of money on infrastructure, including ports that are economically unviable. We have seen their first overseas base in Djibouti and there has been a continuous deployment (in the Gulf of Aden) since 2008. The Indian government is working along with nations in the Indian Ocean Region, in Africa and in South Asia and there are a number of initiatives, from investments to line of credits. So, India as a nation is doing its bit.

A key part of the Indian Navy's plans to ensure presence in the region has been the quest for a third aircraft carrier. Are those plans still on track?

The plan is still on track and we are working to take it forward to get in principle approval for a second aircraft carrier (after the under construction INS Vikrant at Kochi). We have decided the

form and fit—it will be a 65,000 ton CATOBAR (catapult assisted take off but arrested landing) carrier and will be conventionally powered. It is central to the Navy's philosophy to have three aircraft carrier battle groups.

The Navy is also looking for 57 new fighter jets for its second aircraft carrier. Do you think the Rafale controversy will have a bearing towards this procurement?

We should be able to issue the RFP (request for proposal) for this towards the end of 2019. And, I do not think that present occurrences should have any linkage to this at all.

The Navy has traditionally been at the forefront of 'Make in India' but the health of private sector shipyards has been a matter of concern. Is having the private sector sustainable, given the financial ill health of the Reliance Naval yard as well?

Over 200 ships have already been built in India for the Navy, from sea wards defence ships to the aircraft carrier that is under construction. We opened the sector to the private industry but, unfortunately for us, the shipping industry world over collapsed post 2007-08. So, two of the yards have gone bust—Bharti and ABG. The present lot of private yards are having their own financial challenges but we are very keen that there is participation from both the public and private sector yards in our shipbuilding programmes. We need them so that we can build our capability at a much faster rate and I wish that Reliance can sort out its issues.

On the strategic partnerships model for the private sector, how fast do you see the submarine programme progressing? Will Mazagon Dock and Shipbuilders Ltd (MDL) also be a part of the programme?

The process itself has been approved and the specifics for the submarine segment have been drafted and will now come up for approval of the defence acquisition council. We are hopeful that the first among the strategic partnership programmes will be the Naval Utility Helicopters, for which we already have clearances. We are hopeful that the submarine segment will also get approved and we can take this forward. We would also like MDL to be one of the yards to be part of the submarine building programme as they have demonstrated capabilities.

Can you share updates on the plan to build minesweepers in India, as well as the two frigates to be constructed at the Goa Shipyard Ltd (GSL)?

We have signed a contract with Russia for two of the Project 11356 class frigates and we will now sign a contract with GSL for the balance two that are to be made in India. On the minesweepers, we think GSL should be able to issue a new expression of interest and we are hopeful that we will have a multi vendor situation this time.

Source: The Economic Times