

## **IRIS Dena: A Strategic Wake-Up Call**

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A United States (US) Ship Submersible Nuclear (SSN) torpedoed and sank Islamic Republic of Iran Ship (IRIS) Dena approximately 40 miles off Galle, Sri Lanka, on 04 Mar 2026. The action occurred in India's immediate maritime neighbourhood and appears to have been carried out without India being kept in the loop. To be fair, it remains unclear whether advance notice was provided; however, there is an assumption that it was not.

The incident has created considerable debate. Though unfortunate, it should serve as a wake-up call. Beyond striking a blow against Iran, the US appears to have conveyed several strategic messages while simultaneously dismantling certain commonly held myths.

The incident signals that the US will take action where it can, without compunction or moral scruple, unilaterally if needed, when its interests collide with even a so-called global strategic partner. Their past, and even recent, actions like the Trump tariffs, bolstering Pakistan, and the previous Bangladesh regime, etc., all bear testimony to this tendency. The IRIS Dena incident is just another reminder. It is time to drop any blinkers, if there are still any, about benefiting from cooperation with the US unless the exchange favours America better. Empty platitudes, like the largest and the oldest democracy working together, are as meaningless today as they were when they were first coined. The US Deputy Secretary of State, Christopher Landau's statement at the Raisina Dialogue, about a 'US First' approach, with stress on 'Not making the same mistakes with India that we made with China 20 years ago'<sup>1</sup>, should be further proof, if still needed, of the cold and ruthless nature of the international deal making, especially with the US under Trump. India would do well to manage its expectations when engaging with the US. There is a sense that India has often tended to approach its dealings with the US either with excessive optimism or undue caution, more frequently the former.

Bottomline—the US will not shy away from taking actions that suit them even if such actions embarrass their allies; unless the repercussions outweigh the gains.

Coming back to the matters maritime, the sinking of IRIS Dena puts India face-to-face with some stark realities as follows:

- India's shortcomings in underwater domain awareness—particularly its limited ability to detect and track submarines of neutral or hostile states operating in areas of national interest—have long been a matter of concern. The question now is whether this issue can continue to be treated perfunctorily, or whether it must finally be addressed with the seriousness and priority it deserves.
- As per open-source inputs, India is working on a Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS)-like system, in partnership with the US and Japan. The system

would be integrated, if media reports are to be believed, with the existing Fish Hook SOSUS network.

- Points to note: Firstly, there is no concrete timeline indicating completion of this project. In fact, there's hardly anything in the open source to suggest that such a project has even moved beyond discussions. Secondly, would not this system, meant ostensibly to track Chinese submarines, track American SSNs too? If yes, should India pin any hopes on this SOSUS ever becoming a reality? The US submarines are present in India's areas of interest all the time, as proven once again by the IRIS Dena incident. Why would then the US give India the capability to detect and track their submarines?

So, what is the answer? There is no option but to accord priority to anti-submarine warfare, and press the scientific community hard for indigenous solutions. There is a need to put in place something like a sub-sea equivalent of the erstwhile Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme. If the government wants it badly enough, it will happen. Greater cooperation with countries like France, with well-established capability in underwater domain, could be another way forward.

The Americans are clearly debunking the myth of Indian Influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and signalling to anyone who would care to notice that it is them who wield the power and influence, and they would not hesitate to use it when it suits their interests. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Indo-Pacific cooperation, or even a rules-based order may be rendered inconsequential. India would, therefore, do well to examine and prepare its possible response if, under different circumstances, an Indian ship were to be sunk by another power—even the US—within the IOR or elsewhere.

This US behaviour is likely to continue unchecked until India has at least two Ship Submersible Ballistic Nuclear submarines, armed with 10,000-12,000 kms range missiles on patrol at any given time. India should continue to pursue realisation of this deterrent with urgency.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, India would be well advised to pursue its actions quietly and with discretion.

For the most part, India should refrain from pushing too many American buttons. India is not yet sufficiently strong to afford the consequences of unnecessarily provoking the US. In the present environment, particularly with an unpredictable leadership at the top, it does not take much to irritate Washington; prudence, therefore, suggests avoiding actions that exceed India's present capacity to manage the fallout.

It may, therefore, be worth considering whether the somewhat tougher posture observed in India's foreign policy over the past year or two needs to be tempered. The answer may well be in the affirmative.

In 1990, the architect of the modern China, Deng Xiaoping, had laid out a 24-character strategy. Loosely translated into English, it meant, “Observe calmly, secure our position, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership”.<sup>2</sup>

While it may be argued that India is well ahead of where China was in 1990 in terms of gross domestic product, military capability, and overall influence, it remains far from possessing the economic, diplomatic, and military heft required to be counted among the global heavyweights. It would thus be prudent to keep this fact in mind while comparing India to the US or China or when advocating overt strategic muscle-flexing.

Therefore, the principle of ‘Hiding one’s capabilities and biding one’s time’ may not be an unreasonable guideline for India’s foreign policy until its moment arrives. Temperance, after all, need not be mistaken for weakness, even in favourable circumstances.

## **Conclusion**

The sinking of IRIS Dena near India’s maritime neighbourhood underscores a hard geostrategic reality: States act decisively in pursuit of their own interests. For India, the incident should serve as a strategic reminder to strengthen underwater domain awareness, accelerate indigenous maritime capabilities, and pursue a cautious, patient foreign policy while steadily building comprehensive national power.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> The Wire Staff, “US Won’t Repeat China Trade ‘Mistake’ With India, Says Senior State Department Official”, *The Wire*, 06 Mar 2026, accessed 09 March 2026, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/us-deputy-secretary-of-state-christopher-landau-us-china-universities>

<sup>2</sup> Deng Xiaoping, “Deng Xiaoping’s 24-Character Strategy”, *Global Security*, 2013, accessed 09 Mar 2025, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/24-character.htm>

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