



## India's Nuclear Doctrine: Is a Review Necessary?

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### Reluctant Member of the Nuclear Club

Faced with the prospect of having to confront nuclear-armed China and Pakistan, with both of which it had fought wars over unresolved territorial disputes, India conducted a series of nuclear tests at Pokhran, Rajasthan, on May 11 and 13, 1998 and declared itself a state armed with nuclear weapons. Before crossing the nuclear Rubicon, India had sought but had been denied international guarantees that nuclear weapons will not be used against it. As India was not a signatory to the NPT and the CTBT, the country did not violate any treaty obligations.

It is well accepted in India that nuclear weapons are political weapons and not weapons of warfighting and that their sole purpose is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons by India's adversaries. This was reflected in two statements made by then PM Atal Behari Vajpayee in Parliament in May and June 1998, respectively:

"India is now a nuclear weapon state. ... We do not intend to use these weapons for aggression or for mounting threats against any country; these are weapons of self-defence, to ensure that India is not subjected to nuclear threats or coercion."

"India would pursue a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons vis-à-vis other nuclear-armed states and would not use these weapons against non-nuclear countries."

### India's Nuclear Doctrine

Till the May 1998 nuclear tests almost nothing was known about India's nuclear doctrine and force structure in the public domain. As Commandant, College of Combat (now Army War College), Mhow, General K Sundarji, later COAS, had commissioned a series of *Combat Papers* to study nuclear issues in the Indian context on his own initiative. ["Effects of Nuclear Asymmetry on Conventional Deterrence," *Combat Papers* (Mhow), No. 1 (April 1981); "Nuclear Weapons in the Third World Context," *Combat Papers* (Mhow), No. 2 (August 1981)] PM V P Singh is reported to have convened a study group in September 1990 to formulate procedures for effective control of the nation's nuclear arsenal and other issues related to nuclearisation. This group was composed of scientific adviser to the ministry of defence V S Arunachalam, Rajagopala Chidambaram of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), Rajiv Gandhi's adviser Arun Singh, General K.

# India's Nuclear Doctrine...

Sundarji (Retd), K. Subrahmanyam, and some others and presented its findings to the P V Narsimha Rao government.

After the Pokhran tests of May 1998, a draft nuclear doctrine was prepared by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) chaired by the late K Subrahmanyam. It was handed over to the government on August 17, 1999. The draft doctrine was debated within the government by various stakeholders. After several meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), the government issued a statement on January 4, 2003 spelling out India's nuclear doctrine and the operationalisation of its nuclear deterrent. The government statement included the following salient features:

- India will build and maintain a credible minimum deterrent; follow a No First Use posture; and, will use nuclear weapons only “in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere”.
- It was also affirmed that nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.
- Retaliatory attacks will be authorised only by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority.
- Nuclear weapons will not be used against non-nuclear weapon states.
- India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons in the event of a major attack against it with biological or chemical weapons.
- Continuance of strict controls on export of nuclear and missile related materials and technologies, participation in FMCT negotiations, continued moratorium on nuclear testing.
- Continued commitment to the goal of a nuclear weapon free world, through global, verifiable and non-discriminatory disarmament.

Dr Ashley Tellis, well-known South Asia analyst, has written that India's nuclear doctrine is “fundamentally

conservative...” He avers that India's nuclear weapons “are primarily pure deterrents intended to ward off political blackmail that might be mounted by local adversaries in some remote circumstances, while simultaneously providing strategic reassurance to India's political leaders if the country were to face truly dire threats to its security.” India's retaliatory nuclear strike “is likely to... maintain its traditionally strict system of civilian control over all strategic assets; minimise the costs of maintaining a nuclear deterrent at high levels of operational readiness routinely; and, maximise the survivability of its relatively modest nuclear assets...” (“India's Emerging Nuclear Doctrine: Exemplifying the Lessons of the Nuclear Revolution”, *NBR Analysis*, May 2001.)

## Recent Calls to Review the Doctrine

In the decade since the nuclear doctrine was unveiled by the government, several organisations and individuals have commented on it. Some of them have been critical of the NFU posture. Among them, Bharat Karnad (author of *Nuclear Weapons and India's Security*, Macmillan, 2004) has consistently questioned the NFU posture. He has written: “NFU may be useful as political rhetoric and make for stability in situations short of war. But as a serious war-planning predicate, it is a liability. NFU is not in the least credible, because it requires India to first absorb a nuclear attack before responding in kind.”

Former PM Manmohan Singh, while speaking at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, on April 2, 2014, called for a global ‘no first use’ norm. He said, “States possessing nuclear weapons... (must) quickly move to the establishment of a global no-first-use norm...” This was followed by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) promising in its election manifesto to review India's nuclear doctrine to “study in detail India's nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times...” and to “maintain a credible minimum deterrent that is in tune

with changing geostrategic realities.” Some BJP leaders hinted that the NFU posture would also be reviewed. However, sensing the international criticism that was bound to follow, Narendra Modi, BJP’s PM candidate, emphasised that there would be ‘no compromise’ on no first use. Regardless of election-time rhetoric, it is necessary that important government policies must be reviewed periodically with a view to examining and re-validating their key features.

Criticism of the nuclear doctrine has mainly been centred on a few key issues. These include the following:

- The NFU posture is likely to result in unacceptably high initial casualties and damage to Indian cities and infrastructure;
- The threat of ‘massive’ retaliation lacks credibility, especially in retaliation to a tactical nuclear strike on Indian forces on the adversary’s own territory;
- Nuclear retaliation for chemical or biological attack would be illogical, as such attacks could be launched by non-state actors with or without state support;
- And, it would be difficult to determine what constitutes a ‘major’ chemical or biological strike.

Most recently, Lt Gen B S Nagal (Retd), former C-in-C, Strategic Forces Command (SFC) and later head of the Strategic Planning Staff at the National Security Council (NSC) Secretariat, has questioned the efficacy of the nuclear doctrine vis-à-vis the NFU posture. According to him, “It is time to review our policy of NFU... (the) choices are ambiguity or first use.” General Nagal lists six main reasons for seeking a change in the NFU posture (“Checks and Balances”, *Force*, June 2014):

- NFU implies acceptance of large-scale destruction in a first strike;
- The Indian public is not in sync with the government’s NFU policy and the nation is not psychologically prepared;
- It would be morally wrong to accept a first strike – the leadership has no right to place the population ‘in peril’;

- NFU allows the adversary’s nuclear forces to escape punishment as retaliatory strikes will have to be counter value in nature;
- An elaborate and costly ballistic missiles defence (BMD) system would be required to defend against a first strike;
- And, escalation control is not possible once nuclear exchanges begin.

However, most of the political leaders, the bureaucracy and most members of the strategic community support the NFU posture and agree with the government’s policy. The proponents of NFU offer several persuasive arguments in its favour. Their point of view hinges around the following reasons:

- India’s strategic restraint posture exemplified by NFU has resulted in major gains internationally, including the lifting of economic sanctions and the removal of technology denial regimes, civil nuclear cooperation agreements and accommodation in multilateral nuclear export control regimes. Most of these gains will be frittered away if India opts for first use;
- Complex and costly command and control and sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) systems are necessary for a first use posture;
- A first use posture will deny India the opportunity to engage in conventional warfare below the nuclear threshold;
- First use will lower the nuclear threshold and make the use of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) more likely;
- And, South Asia will again be dubbed a ‘nuclear flashpoint’. This will encourage international meddling and will discourage investment.

### **Acid Test of NFU: Operational Yardstick**

However, the acid test of whether or not the NFU posture is justified should be to test it against the yardstick of

## ...Is a Review Necessary?

military operations during war. The likely circumstances in which first use may be considered appropriate by its advocates and the counter arguments of its proponents are discussed briefly below.

The most common scenarios include first use by way of pre-emption based on intelligence warning, or during launch on warning (LoW) or launch through attack (LTA). In all of these, there are no easy answers to some obvious questions: What if intelligence regarding an imminent first strike is wrong – the (non)-existence of WMDs in Iraq is a good example? Which targets will be hit in a first strike? Counter value or counter force or both? Is the destruction of the adversary's cities justified

on suspicion of imminent launch? In either case, the adversary's surviving nuclear weapons will be employed to successfully target major Indian cities. Would it be worthwhile risking the destruction of Delhi, Mumbai and other cities in Kenneth Waltz's words "in the military pursuit of problematic gains"?

Major military reverses are also said to justify the first use of nuclear weapons. In the land battle, the worst-case scenarios that are bound to cause some anxiety include the cutting off of the Pathankot-Jammu national highway NH-1A somewhere near Samba; an ingress by the Pakistan army over the forward obstacle system in Punjab or Rajasthan; and, a major incursion into the

Thar Desert. In none of these scenarios is the situation likely to become so critical as to justify escalation to nuclear levels by way of a first strike as sufficient reserves are available with the Pivot Corps to restore an adverse situation. Similarly, if an aircraft carrier and one submarine are destroyed or, an important airbase with nuclear-capable aircraft is severely damaged, a first strike would not be justified. Hence, it emerges quite clearly that India's NFU posture was justified when it was first notified and remains appropriate even today.

### Concluding Observations

Deterrence is ultimately a mind game. The essence of deterrence is that it must not be allowed to break down. India's nuclear doctrine must enhance and not undermine nuclear deterrence. The NFU posture remains feasible for India's nuclear doctrine of credible minimum deterrence. However, the word 'massive' in the government statement should be substituted with 'punitive' as massive is not credible and limits retaliatory options. The threat of nuclear retaliation against chemical and biological attack should be dropped from the doctrine as it is impractical. Also, the credibility of India's nuclear doctrine needs to be substantially enhanced through a skillfully drawn up signalling plan.



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