Indian Nuclear Programme: Evolution and the Policy of No- First Use

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Abstract

Since the attainment of nuclear weapon capability, India has adopted a posture of no- first use and inflicting unacceptable damage, if provoked. Though widely praised, this policy is suspected at international level and considered inadequate at domestic level. Recently, this policy is coming under heavy pressure which calls for a clear analysis of the policy as well as its pros and cons. This article analyses the evolution of Indian nuclear programme in terms of weaponisation since the 1970s and the subsequent nuclear doctrine in terms of the no-first use posture. The strategic requirements that formed the basis of India's no- first use policy remain more or less unchanged and yet, the strategic attitudes are becoming more hawkish, calling for a debate.

Keywords: Nuclear, weapons, doctrine, deterrence.

The most striking feature of the modern era is the spread of nuclear weapons and the sense of prestige that is associated with the possession of nuclear weapons. Nuclear technology which could be a turning point in the history of human civilization, if used in energy generation, came out to be the ultimate weapon to annihilate the human civilization. Even more disturbing is further sophistication and legitimisation of nuclear weapons by big powers culminating in a chain reaction by other states to acquire or develop them, creating a fear of nuclear escalation all over the world. It has also become an important factor in the perception of one state regarding the capabilities and intent of other state and as such the working of normal state-to-state relations. The nuclear weapon capabilities of a state, especially those states that have a history of aggressive policy, constitute the ultimate threat. Unlike the conventional war, whose damage is repairable, the damage caused by a nuclear war would be disastrous to the humanity. It is aptly noted that, "A nuclear war is not a continuation of politics by other means. It is the end of all politics. When the use or the threat of use of nuclear weapons by states come to be accepted as legitimate by their people, it is inevitable that some members or groups highly motivated to achieve objectives different from those of the majority would also develop perceptions that there was nothing illegitimate about similar use of mass violence by them in pursuit of 'their' goals." (Palit and Namboodiri, 1979)

At the same time, it is also understood that a nuclear war is neither fightable nor winnable. Yet, the possession of nuclear weapons is considered a matter of prestige as well as it generates a feeling of security from the nuclear intimidation by other states. In the world setting those who possess nuclear weapons are respected more in comparison to those who choose to remain non-nuclear weapon

states and either they have to live under constant threat or acquire some kind of 'assurance' or 'nuclear umbrella' from the nuclear weapon states. In that process these states may have to sacrifice at least some part of their sovereignty, thus affecting the execution of an independent foreign policy. India chose the other option i.e., to become nuclear weapon state. Given a long history of hostile relationship with the neighbouring countries, nuclear development has remained an important factor in the strategic thinking of India. Yet, the development of India's nuclear capability was in response to the global setting and not the regional compulsions and as such, the hostile relations with neighbours figured to a lesser degree for India on that matter.

India's 1974 nuclear explosion was triggered mainly by the Chinese and the US nuclear-intimidation exerted upon India during the 1971 Bangladesh war and later on, other factors such as international prestige and regional considerations were added to it, turning the nuclear dimension an explosive one in Indian strategic thinking. With the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, situation changed a bit. With the demise of the USSR, India had no supporter left which could rescue it in the case of a Chinese or US attempt of nuclear intimidation. At the same time, Pakistan, whose nuclear programme was purely a response to the Indian nuclear capability, also lost its position of a frontline state for the US as the Soviet armies no longer stayed in Afghanistan. Now, the pressure was mounted upon both the countries to join the nuclear non-proliferations regimes.

The subsequent period was surcharged with a media hype aimed at bringing India and Pakistan into the folds of nuclear non- proliferation regimes. Western news agencies and other non-governmental organisations begun to project South Asia as a 'nuclear flashpoint' in order to stop the nuclear development in the region. A task force of the Carnegie Endowment projected that India by the end of 1992 would be possessing sufficient plutonium to manufacture between 63 and 203 nuclear weapons. Pakistan, similarly, was feared to be possessing sufficient uranium to manufacture 5-34 weapons. The conclusions drawn by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) were of India possessing enough plutonium for 60 and Pakistan possessing enough uranium for 6-10 nuclear weapons by 1991 and by the end of 1995, they could manufacture 85 and 20-25 weapons respectively. **(**Cited in Chari, 1995) But there were two flaws to be pointed out in these reports, first, they assume all fissile material produced, to be utilised for military purposes ignoring the civilian energy programmes and second, they assume all the fissile material produced to be of weapon grade which was an unverified assumption. (Chari, 1995). Since then, the situation has radically altered as far as the number of nuclear weapons is concerned.

Again, in 1993, US investigative reporter Seymour Hersh revealed in New York magzine that India and Pakistan were very close to a nuclear exchange during Pakistan's military exercise Zarb-e-Momin in 1990 which was averted by the visit of Robert Gates, the Deputy National Security Advisor to the US President. According to this report, Pakistan prepared for a nuclear attack on India, evacuated Kahuta nuclear facility in case of a retaliatory Indian attack and moved the nuclear weapons towards an air base where F-16 modified to carry nuclear

weapons were placed on strip-alert with pilots in the cockpits. These reports were denied by the army-chiefs and the foreign ministers of both the countries. (Chari, 1979; Bhaskar, 1996 also see, Jasjit Singh, 1996) At the same time, China continued to pose a security threat to India despite heading towards normalisation of relations, apart from working in coalition with Pakistan against India.

> "China's calculus might be founded on the determination that Pakistan would, in any case, acquire nuclear capabilities by its own single minded and strenuous efforts, hence, China's strategic interests lie in consolidating its existing special relationship with the emerging nuclear weapon power, apart from strategically containing India within the confines of South India." (Chari, 1979)

But India could not go for strengthening its position on nuclear front because "putting the nuclear option into practice even against China would invite a similar action from Pakistan. Thus, whatever gains India would make by going nuclear would have been overweighed by the prospective negative impact of the very decision."(Shyam Babu, 1992) Moreover, India was also hopeful about the success of its political initiatives towards nuclear disarmament.

In its efforts towards nuclear disarmament, India presented the 'G-28 Proposal For a Programme of Action For the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons', popularly known as Rajiv Gandhi's Action Plan, for a phased elimination of nuclear weapons. The plan was rejected by the world powers. This failure led Rajiv Gandhi to enhance the IGMDP, as a step towards achieving the suitable delivery systems for nuclear warheads. Although Pakistan's scientists had confirmed a weapon capability as early as 1987, Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto denied such reports while continuing clandestine activities to acquire nuclear equipments and materials needed for weaponisation, along with the acquisition of missile delivery systems for nuclear warheads. Between 1988 and 1990 India successfully testified nuclear capable 'Prithvi' and 'Agni' missiles and Pakistan 'Hatf I' and 'Hatf II' apart from acquiring Chinese M-11 missiles. This indicates that the two countries were after all moving towards weapons programme.

> According to one opinion, India had been able to develop a nuclear weapon by 1990. "In the period of 1987-1990 India was totally vulnerable to the Pakistani nuclear threat. It is possible that Pakistanis thought India already had nuclear deterrent capability". (Subrahmanyam, in Jasjit Singh (ed.), 1998) But the Indian leaders chose not to disclose the weapon capability and followed the concept of 'non-weaponised deterrence', keeping the nuclear core and the rest of the weapon assembly separate. In this way a complete nuclear weapon did not exist, although India was fully capable of assembling the weapon at a short notice. (Subrahmanyam, in Jasjit Singh (ed.),1998)

Erosion of restraint - security and strategic* concerns *:

By the year 1995, significant developments started taking place in the field of nuclear weapons' development on global and regional levels. The atmosphere was overheated after the indefinite extension of the NPT and the reports of Pakistan moving its missiles at the border, India trying another nuclear test and the US desisting it, Chinese supply to nuclear material to Pakistan despite adhering to the NPT and ongoing negotiation for an essentially discriminatory CTBT. But the real danger was mounted by Pakistan in April 1998 by testifring nuclear capable Ghauri MRBM, able to reach almost whole India. Pakistan also revealed its plan to manufacture long range ballistic missile 'Ghazanavi', completely tilting the power balance in its favour. Earlier India had a strategic depth vis-a-vis Pakistan where the whole of Pakistan was within reach of India's Prithvi missiles.

The Chinese policies were also directly affecting India's nuclear thinking. Though China and India were on a path to normalise their relations since Rajiv Gandhi era, yet the Chinese drive for pursuing a multi-faceted defence modernisation programme was causing Indian concern. China was also trying to gain a foothold in the Indian ocean and had established a naval base at Burmese Coco Islands, in order to keep an eye on the movements of Indian navy stationed near Andaman and Nicobar Islands. A Chinese spokesman is reported to have said, "….we will not allow Indian Ocean to remain Indian Ocean". (Quoted in Khanna, 1998, p. 3.) Also, China's attainment of the ICBM capability signified that now its nuclear weapons could reach any major north Indian city. China was also aspiring to achieve a blue water navy with the capability of Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM) extending its naval presence to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. (Palit and Namboodiri, 1979) Moreover, the multi-dimensional technological defence cooperation between China and Pakistan that included nuclear technology aggravated the threat perceptions of India. Despite adhering to the NPT, China had not stopped aiding Pakistan in the nuclear field. It is aptly noted in this context that "the peculiar system of NPT works best where it is least needed and does not work at all where it is needed most."(Chitkara, 1996, p. 177.)

Finally, on May 11 and 13, 1998 India conducted a series of five nuclear tests in Pokharan and confirmed its status of a nuclear weapon state. Reacting to Indian action, Pakistan conducted a series of six nuclear tests on May 28, 1998 in Chagai Hills, in order to achieve parity with India on the nuclear issue. Although India, by testing a thermonuclear device or Hydrogen Bomb, has established superiority in nuclear technology over Pakistan.

Deterrence : An important feature of the new post Pokharan II and post Chagai nuclear policy had been that both countries are terming their nuclear arsenal as 'minimum credible nuclear deterrence'. The central thesis of the theory of deterrence is that it is the possession of nuclear weapons that ensures that nuclear war will never take place. Both sides should possess a retaliatory strike capability that is invulnerable, that will not be annihilated under any circumstances by a first strike. 'Perception' and 'psychology' play an important role in convincing the adversary that any aggression will only lead to its own annihilation.

(Jayaraman, 1999) As claimed by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, "The nuclear weapon is not an offensive weapon. It is a weapon of self-defence. It is the kind of weapon that helps in preserving the peace. If in the days of the Cold War there was no use of force, it was because of the balance of terror". (quoted in Jayaraman, 1999, p. 115.) The Indian side claims that it has developed a minimum nuclear deterrence against the Chinese nuclear superiority and its proliferationalist policies. Pakistan, on the other hand, claims to have developed a deterrence against Indian conventional and nuclear superiority. But then, such a deterrence has always existed between them. Being the creator of Pakistan's nuclear capability, China can easily assume that India possess the similar weapon capability. Thus, such a deterrence was already existing on Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistani planes.

There is yet another theory of 'non-weaponised deterrence'. (Rifaat Hussain, 1998) Prior to these tests and especially since the mid 1980s when India and Pakistan became nuclear capable states they had tacitly embraced precepts of non-weaponised deterrence (NWD) to regulate their mutual antagonism. Deterrence according to this logic is based upon latent capabilities rather than deployed weaponary. The doctrine of NWD entailed three key assumptions. First, the possession of minimum nuclear capabilities by both sides created conditions for robust strategic deterrence. This was mainly because of the 'first stage uncertainty' which both sides had to reckon with while planning a strike against each other. The 'opacity' surrounding unassembled Indo-Pak nuclear devices effectively militated against achieving first strike reliability. Further, since in a posture of non-weaponisation nuclear warheads are kept separate from delivery systems, this lengthened the warning time available to both sides. This increased warning time gave the two adversaries and the interested third parties an opportunity to initiate conflict resolution measures. Second, the existence of small numbers of nuclear devices on both sides made issues of command and control simpler to resolve and safer in terms of minimizing the chances for accidental or inadvertent war. Third, the sheer fact that both India and Pakistan were nuclear capable induced a degree of caution in their strategic interactions, since both realised that any escalation of their conflict to a nuclear level would result in extreme consequences. This realisation generated a situation of 'existential deterrence' between India and Pakistan.

India knew of Pakistan's nuclear capabilities since 1987 when Dr A Q Khan broke the news. Similarly, even though the Indian deterrent came into being in 1990, its 1974 explosions were enough to disturb Pakistan. Pakistan was well aware of India's nuclear capabilities even when it unleashed its covert operations in Kashmir in 1989 and has sustained them till now, yet there has been no nuclear exchange. This factor pushes the quest for a deterrence behind other priorities such as India's quest for the role of a global player and Pakistan's quest for the leadership of the Islamic world. As for the nuclear non proliferation regimes, the NPT had not produced the desired results and the CTBT was ready to be concluded after which detonating a nuclear device would be difficult and the goal of complete nuclear disarmament still unachievable.

Nuclear Doctrine

Unlike the other nuclear weapon powers, India formulated its nuclear policy through public discussion. India's National Security Advisory Board drafted the Indian Nuclear Doctrine, released it on August 17, 1999 for public debate and to be examined by the strategic policy group and National Security Council and then the Cabinet committee approved it on January 4, 2003. The draft consists of eight parts and puts together the principles stated at various points of time by the Indian policy makers.(Draft Report of NSAB, MEA, 1999) In its Preamble, the document outlined the broad principles for the development, deployment and employment of India's nuclear forces and stated that the details of policy and strategy concerning force structures, deployment and employment of nuclear forces will flow from this framework and will be laid down separately and kept under constant review. As part of well defined objectives, the document recognised the need of an effective, credible deterrence, in the absence of global nuclear disarmament as well as adequate retaliatory capability in case the deterrence fail. It is in this context of 'retaliation only' policy, the document stated India's no first use posture regarding the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons, against any state and the non use of nuclear weapons against the states which do not possess nuclear weapons, or are not aligned with nuclear weapon powers. But at the same time maintained that "any nuclear attack on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor." In the projected force structure, the draft doctrine favoured the maintenance of conventional military capabilities and spoke of a triad of aircrafts, land based mobile missiles and sea based assets. The principles of credibility and effectiveness were given a central position and also the survivability against surprise attacks and first uses. The fifth part of the draft doctrine dealt extensively with the command and control structure and assured that authority to release nuclear weapons resides in the civilian government and also assured an effective C4I2 mechanism i.e., command, control, communication, computing, intelligence and information system. As part of security, safety and disaster control mechanisms, the document ensured that the nuclear weapons, their manufacture, transportation and storage system shall be undertaken for nuclear weapons against possible theft, loss, sabotage, unauthorised access or accidental use. It strongly affirmed that efforts in research and development shall be continued to keep up with technical advances in this field. The eighth and final part of the draft nuclear doctrine reiterates India's commitment towards global nuclear disarmament as a national security objective.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Brajesh Mishra, National Security Advisor highlighted the contemporary security environment and India's need to ensure the element of strategic autonomy in decision making and reiterated India's position that global security would be enhanced by the universal elimination of all nuclear weapons. He regarded the civilian control over the nuclear weapons as 'a cardinal principle' and stressed upon the restraint and responsibility as is expected from the world's largest democracy. (Draft Report of NSAB, MEA, 1999)

After a period of four years, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) approved this nuclear doctrine on January 4th, 2003 and established a Nuclear Command Authority comprising of a Political Council and an Executive Council chaired by the prime Minister and national Security Advisor respectively.(CCS review, 2003)

The Indian Nuclear Doctrine thus envisages a 'no-first use' pledge for the nuclear weapon states, non-use assurance for the non nuclear weapon states, provides for the maintenance of credible forces for the security of the nation, does not project any 'enemies' or 'possible targets', does not talk about any other country's conventional or nuclear force projection, in other words it is not 'country specific' and does not give any details of the budget and financial allocations for the achievements of its objectives. At the same time, the plans for a triad of land, sea and air based delivery systems were quite ambitious even for India which happened to be a regional power already. This approach to nuclear deterrence is, in the words of former Indian foreign secretary Shyam Saran, "appropriate to the current geopolitical environment, is aligned with [India's] existing and projected levels of technological capabilities and affordability and most importantly, is reflective of India's domestic realities and its value system."(Saran, 2013)

New controversies

For almost one and a half decades, the policy of no- first use remained the core principle of Indian nuclear posture without fail or question but the problems of cross border insurgency, hostile neighbours and other security concerns remain the same. No doubt, India had not been threatened with a discriminatory non proliferation regime or a full scale war with any of its neighbours, yet the kargil crisis right after the nuclear tests could not be averted and terrorist activities also continued which included the 2008 Mumbai attacks, better known as 26/11. The new debate is on the usefulness or even wisdom of the no first use policy. The debate was further fuelled in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when BJP stated in its election manifesto its intent to "study in detail India's nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times". (Text, BJP manifesto for 2014 Lok Sabha Elections)

Although it did not mention revising the no first use policy, the hardliners assumed that a stronger government in India might take a hardline stance and deviate from the posture that the country has been following for one and a half decades. The usefulness of this policy is also being questioned regarding the intentions of India's two main adversaries, Pakistan and China. And yet, the advantages from the no first use policy are many are wide ranging. Firstly, the nuclear doctrine talks of inflicting unacceptable damage to the adversary which requires massive military build up in case of a retaliatory strike and even more so in case of a first use as it would require massive investment not only in weapons and delivery systems but also intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) infrastructure. As noted "If India were to develop limited nuclear options with a view toward a counterforce capability, it would need to

make major adjustments to at least two facets of its current nuclear practice. One change would involve the militarization of India's nuclear strategy and decision making, which would be a revolutionary shift in how India plans and executes its national security policy. The second change would be the procurement of a suite of military hardware and software upgrades that would provide it with the capabilities to carry out precise, time sensitive nuclear strikes on Pakistani mobile missiles, which pose incredible targeting difficulties."(Dalton & Perkovich ,2016)

And yet, the bigger problem would be India's own culture and regional aspirations, which craves "to establish India's role as a responsible nuclear-armed state that is willing to pursue confidence building measures . . . in its region," former Indian nuclear envoy Rakesh Sood explained in 2014. (Sood, 2014) During the Kargil crisis, this factor was particularly dominant in the strategic thinking of Indian policy makers. it is clear from New Delhi's policy deliberations at the time of Kargil conflict that concerns about the potential for nuclear escalation and India's desire to be seen as a responsible nuclear power did constrain India's response. (see, Narang, 2014 and Lambeth, 2012). A weaponisation programme would be a major shift in not only this aspiration but also larger role that India plays on the world scene.

In the nutshell, it can be seen as a game of hawks and doves where doves seem to have the winning edge, but, then, the world is not driven by the doves entirely and hawks also may have their way, the situation certainly remains volatile enough.

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