

Essay

Assessing India's Nuclear Doctrine

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In 1947, when India became independent, the country had scientists like Dr. Homi J. Bhabha who realized the power of the atom for the development of the country. The Atomic Energy Act was passed in 1948, the first plutonium separator plant was setup in 1964 and Smiling Buddha, the first atomic explosion for peaceful purposes was carried out in 1974. However, India became a nuclear weapon power only twenty-four years later in 1998.

For a country which has always believed in a nuclear weapons' free world, the decision to weaponise was not out of political considerations or national prestige. The only touchstone that guided it was national security.¹ China went nuclear in 1964. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which created a divide between the nuclear haves and have nots, was signed in 1968. During the Bangladesh war in 1971, the Sino-US axis targeting India and the coercive diplomacy by the US in moving its Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal heightened India's sense of vulnerability. The eighties were turbulent with Pakistan reportedly having made the bomb with Chinese help by 1987 with the US looking the other way because of their interests in Afghanistan. The Khalistan movement in Punjab backed by the ISI was gaining ground. It was during this period that the control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme which till now was with the civilian government, passed into the hands of the military. By the end of this decade, the problem in Kashmir too worsened. With the collapse of USSR in 1991 and a Pakistan friendly USA, Indian security concerns

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deepened. The extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995 and the adoption of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by the UN General Assembly in 1996 were further compelling factors. Finally, India left with no option but to stand up for its own security interests went in for Operation Shakti- a series of five nuclear tests, in May 1998.

India's Nuclear Doctrine

As announced by the Government of India, these tests were not directed against any country; these were intended to reassure the people of India about their security and to convey the resolve and capability of the Government to safeguard national security interests.

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The Indian Nuclear Programme had been thought through over the years because of a hostile security environment. Therefore, it was within a short period of only fifteen months that in August 1999, a draft Nuclear Doctrine was released. After extensive discussions over the next four years, the Cabinet Committee on Security approved the Country's Nuclear Doctrine which was shared with the public on open domain on 4 Jan 2003. It was marked by openness and a sense of responsibility and restraint - a restraint born from strength and of an assurance of action.²

The Indian Nuclear Doctrine can be summarized as follows:

1. Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent.
2. A posture of "No First Use". Nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere.
3. Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.
4. Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority.
5. Non – use of nuclear weapons against non – nuclear weapon states
6. In the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.

7. A continuance of strict controls on export of nuclear and missile related materials and technologies and continued observance of the moratorium on nuclear tests.
8. Continued commitment to the goal of a nuclear weapon free world, through global, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament.³

In the following segment an endeavor is made to assess the essential aspects of the Doctrine to ascertain their relevance in the present context.

Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)

The key factor for the success of nuclear deterrence is the adversary nation's belief that the costs of launching a nuclear strike against India would be unbearable and unacceptable. It is not about who suffers more but about how much the aggressors themselves would have to suffer. It is, therefore, imperative that the country must be capable of absorbing a first strike and thereafter, be able to carry out massive retaliation to inflict unacceptable damage on the aggressor. Possession of adequate wherewithal to carry this out is a basic prerequisite. The question always comes up as to what is the number of warheads and launch systems that the country must have to reach the minimum credible mark. To quote Mr. Jaswant Singh, a former Minister of External Affairs, who on 16 December 1998, as part of a speech in Parliament stated that "*The minimum is not a fixed physical quantification. It is a policy approach dictated by and determined in the context of our security environment. There is no fixity. Therefore, as our security environment changes and alters and as new demands begin to be placed on it, our requirements too are bound to be evaluated*".

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situation and assessment of threats will determine the size and nature of our Strategic Forces. The number and types of warheads, launch systems and platforms will therefore remain dynamic, followed when required, by enhancement, upgradation and modernisation. If India has to absorb a first strike and retaliate

thereafter, it must realistically cater for losses of the decision-making body, elements of C4ISR, launch platforms, bases, warheads and personnel required to operationalize them all. Adequacy of resources for massive retaliation are essential for deterrence.

"In the Cuban crisis, the problem of a 'stable deterrent' in 1961 did not lie in an insufficiency of American missiles. It lay, rather, in the need for the Soviets to develop sufficient effective ICBMs (and submarine) forces, to deter the US. That is an ugly but an unavoidable fact".⁴

Deterrence is finally a function of military capability and the demonstrated political will to employ this capability if and when required. The recently televised announcement by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the operationalisation of a triad on completion of the first operational deployment of the SSBN, INS Arihant, is a strong step in signaling of both, India's military as well as its political capability.

No First Use (NFU)

India went nuclear for reasons of national security to ensure that it could never be subjected to nuclear coercion. It has always believed that nuclear wars will only bring destruction and therefore the aim of weaponising was not for war fighting but purely for deterrence. Accordingly, the policy of No First Use was adopted. The policy, though aligned with the national ethos, is based on sound military logic. It implies that India would absorb a first strike and then carry out massive retaliation to inflict unacceptable damage to the aggressor. This tenet is not country specific but is applicable to all aggressor nations.

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NFU has undoubtedly invited a lot of debate. One analyst calls the logic more cultural than strategic. Some say that this would be detrimental to national security while others opine that it would lead to a larger arsenal than one that would be required with a first use policy. Some also question the connotation of 'first strike'. Would reliable inputs of the enemy preparing to launch constitute a strike? Doubts and questions linger. A few also dismiss the doctrine as being essentially for international posturing and could change in times of war. The highest concern in a conflict between nuclear armed countries is when one adversary feels cornered and desperate and might be tempted to act irrationally and launch in panic. NFU, logically negates this possibility leading to strategic stability. In the tensions that followed the terror attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001, General Pevez Musharraf had publicly stated that he would not rule out the possibility of using nuclear weapons. Last year in July 2017, in an interview to a Japanese daily, 'Mainichi Shinbum', he stated that "he

had many sleepless nights asking himself whether he could or would deploy nuclear weapons but decided against it for fear of retaliation. We didn't do that – thank God”.

In the summer of 1961, President J.F. Kennedy was formally briefed on the net assessment of a nuclear war between the two super powers. Dean Rusk in his memoirs, 'As I Saw It', states: *that the briefing convinced us that a nuclear war can never be fought. Also, what emerged was a perception that a preemptive strike would bring about devastating retaliation even before the missiles reached their targets.*⁵ No

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country can guarantee complete annihilation of the adversary's nuclear arsenal in a first decapitating strike. Retaliation is inevitable. In fact, for those analysts who believe that nuclear weapons in the subcontinent lead to instability and make it a potential flash point, it

must be emphasised that the Indian doctrine of NFU not only contributes to but also ensures strategic stability.

Massive Retaliation

Indian response to a nuclear strike is massive retaliation to inflict unacceptable damage to the aggressor. Questions arise as to would this be the appropriate response to a limited nuclear strike by Pakistan with tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), reportedly of sub kilo or very low yields. Would India be justified to respond in a massive manner or should the doctrine be changed to a proportionate, flexible or a graduated response? A proportionate or a flexible response would in all probability result in a stronger response from the adversary. When would these alternate responses end? Nuclear wars cannot be fought with 'artillery like' exchanges. It is not the measure of yield but the principle of the nuclear 'threshold' being crossed, that matters.

At this juncture it is pertinent to study the thoughts of nuclear strategists involved in the Cuban crisis. Martin J Sherwin stated: *"The literal fright that the crisis engendered, put an end to serious considerations of limited nuclear war. They realized that limited nuclear exchange would be more analogous to stumbling on a slippery slope than climbing the rungs of an escalation ladder"*. George Perkovich quoting Robert McNamara on Soviet TNW's in Cuba said *"No one should believe that a US force could have been attacked with TNWs without responding with nuclear weapons with disastrous consequences"*. Even the US nuclear posture review 2018 clearly specifies

that *'miscalculation by Russia or China of even limited first nuclear use against USA will trigger incalculable and intolerable costs for Moscow or Beijing'*.

The Indian nuclear doctrine states exactly the same, i.e., massive retaliation to any nuclear strike, basing it on the premise that nuclear thresholds should not be crossed, and nuclear wars must never be fought. The fear of massive retaliation in response to a nuclear first strike, to inflict incalculable and unacceptable damage, is therefore essential for strategic stability. The doctrine also talks of an option of retaliation with nuclear weapons in the event of a major biological or a chemical weapons strike against India. This option is debatable.

Political Control of Nuclear Weapons

In any country, the decision to launch a nuclear weapon should rest with the political leadership. The Doctrine states that Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the Political Council, chaired by the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) letter of January 2003 approved the arrangement for alternate chains of command for retaliatory strikes under all eventualities. Further safety from an accidental or unauthorised launch is ensured by a two-man rule for access to armament and delivery systems.⁶ By having the decision to launch being taken by the political hierarchy advised by professionals, it has been ensured that these decisions of extreme sensitivity are taken in a very balanced, considered and a very mature manner. At the same time ensuring, by appointing alternate chains of command, that retaliatory actions will be undertaken under all eventualities

Commitment to Disarmament

India has always opposed the existence of nuclear weapons. Therefore, the doctrine stresses on nonproliferation, moratorium on nuclear tests and continued commitment to a nuclear free world through verifiable, non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament. This is essential, and India must support all global and regional initiatives to achieve this ultimate goal. However, in the foreseeable future this point appears to be divorced from reality and is idealistic. For any nuclear power to give up each and every weapon is questionable and for any agency to guarantee that this has been done is not possible. In any case, the capability to rebuild at short notice will always remain. Absolute disarmament, for the moment, is therefore not a practical option. One viable option could be a declared No First Use Policy by all nuclear weapon powers.

For a No First Use Treaty

The fear of devastation by a retaliatory nuclear strike will only increase as nations develop economically and nuclear weapons become even more potent. In 1962, a nuclear war in Cuba was finally averted when the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev wrote to the US President John F Kennedy. As quoted by Robert Kennedy in his book: "*Khrushchev wrote a very long and emotional letter – the emotion directed at the death and destruction that a nuclear war would bring to his people and to all of mankind. That, he said, again and again, must be avoided*".⁷ Recently, in June 2018, after the 'fire and fury' rhetoric between USA and North Korea, the US President, Trump, finally held talks with Chairman Kim Jong Un of North Korea to diffuse the situation. The conciliatory action happened despite the fact that North Korea, likely had a thermo-nuclear capability and possibly a few ICBMs capable of reaching mainland USA.

This points to the fact that it will be well-nigh impossible for any leader to order a 'first strike' and placing his own country at grave risk. If one critically examines the doctrines of the nine (including Israel) nuclear powers, most appear to be de facto veering on to a no first use approach. China professes NFU while Russia talks of using them when the very existence of the state is under threat. In NPR 2018, USA places the highest strategic priority on deterrence and considers employment only in extreme circumstances to protect its vital interests and those of its allies. France too would use nuclear weapons to protect its vital interests and follows a concept of firing a warning missile before launching a strike. Israel, believed to be following the Samson option, portrays ambiguity in possession of nuclear weapons and says it will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the region. UK does not rule out first use but that leaves a scope for ambiguity. Only Pakistan whose nuclear programme is India centric, portrays a cavalier approach.

The Indian Nuclear Doctrine marked by openness, restraint and strength, is balanced and pragmatic and gives a possible direction to others. Based on this doctrine, it is recommended that backed by credible deterrence capabilities to inflict incalculable destruction on an aggressor, nuclear nations must abandon their deterrence policy based on first use and mutually negotiate a No First Use Treaty to enable strategic stability in the world.

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