

India's Nuclear Doctrine: A Study of its Tenets

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In May 1998, after conducting a series of nuclear tests India declared itself a state with nuclear capability. What is noteworthy is that India had achieved the capability to assemble nuclear weapons and developed the essential delivery systems (both missiles and aircraft) much before the historic 1998 tests. India has always asserted discomfort with the existence of nuclear weapons. After years of debate on the global elimination of nuclear weapons, and nearly losing hope of the nuclear weapons states ever moving towards nuclear disarmament, India exercised prudence in declaring its strategic capability. India's decision helped it to cross the nuclear rubicon and break free from years of established nuclear apartheid between the nuclear haves and have-nots. Thereafter, India decided to construct a practical doctrine for a system of deterrence that was reasonable, effective, affordable, and defensive. The nuclear doctrine drafting group, constituted out of the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), and set up in December 1998, and after a little over seven months of debate and discussions, came out with its 'draft' doctrine that could be effective in letter and spirit.¹

Subsequently, India announced its nuclear doctrine on 17 August 1999, but preferred to call it a "draft".² The draft doctrine emphasised the acquisition of a credible minimum deterrence premised upon the principles of a no-first-use policy and a counter-strike capability to inflict unacceptable damage. However, the draft nuclear doctrine was criticised for being ambiguous in terms of its status as a policy document; it did "not constitute a settled policy". Subsequently, on January 2003, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) approved the draft nuclear doctrine and amplified and adopted it as the official nuclear doctrine of India.³ This document is the official declaration of India's nuclear policy governing India's nuclear assets. Unlike its nuclear neighbours, India articulates a well-written official document underlining its nuclear posture. However, India remains committed to the goal of a nuclear weapons free world.

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What is a Nuclear Doctrine?

A doctrine comprises a set of principles that define the conditions under which a certain type and quantum of force would be used.⁴ It comprises a set of established principles that conveys the willingness of a state to use nuclear weapons against any adversary for purposes of securing national interests. A doctrine seeks to regulate the military forces in a battlefield and acts as a centralised command structure for securing specific objectives during combat. It lays down broad guidelines fundamentally anchored in the form of a grand strategy and a policy that determines a nation's military posture and its material capabilities. It defines the national objectives, their rationales, and the means to achieve them. The purpose of a nuclear doctrine is to provide the *raison d'être* of the nuclear weapon for a nation, as also to make available the philosophy behind fundamental questions of when, how, and where the weapon would be used for national defence.⁵ The 2003 official nuclear doctrine emphasised maximum restraint in the use of nuclear weapons, absolute political control over decision-making, and an effective interface between civilian and military leaders in the management of its atomic quiver.⁶ The official doctrine while retaining most of the principles as enunciated in the NSAB draft document amplified the role of nuclear weapons by advocating their usage to deter chemical and biological weapons attacks and the replacement of the term "punitive retaliation" by "massive retaliation", which has been criticised as, ambiguous and confusing, by some strategic experts. The cardinal elements of the draft nuclear doctrine are

- Credible minimum deterrent
- No-first-use (NFU)
- Effective command and control
- Unilateral moratorium on testing
- Global, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament

Credible Minimum Deterrence

In December 1998, India publicly committed itself to a "credible minimum deterrent" policy. As defined by the Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh,:

The minimum is not fixed physical quantification. It is a policy approach dictated by and determined in the context of our security environment. There is fixity. Therefore, as our security environment

changes and alters and as new demands begin to be placed upon it, our requirements too are bound to be re-valuated.⁷

Minimum deterrence does not seek parity with an adversary's nuclear weapons force-structure but constitutes the fewest number of deliverable weapons that will dissuade the enemy from initiating a nuclear strike against India. India's nuclear doctrine does not quantify the term minimum in terms of numbers or types of nuclear weapons. Thus, immediately after the tests, the National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra in an authoritative statement made clear, "We do not seek parity with China..What we are seeking is a minimum deterrent".⁸ This official statement unambiguously suggests that India is neither interested in any nuclear arms race nor has it embarked upon any open-ended nuclear weapons programme. It rejects the concept of nuclear war fighting and does not consider it necessary for India to match its nuclear warheads and delivery systems with those of its nuclear adversaries. This perspective projects a minimalist strategy.

Some critics do question how India can aspire to achieve "maximum deterrence" out of such an expansive "minimum" nuclear deterrent policy. Notwithstanding, the official reticence about India's "minimum" force structure, the nuclear doctrine speaks of a credible minimum deterrence. It advocates a comprehensive strategic force consisting of a triad of air, naval and land-based nuclear force structure. It provides for the establishment of an effective and instantaneous intelligence and early warning system coupled with a spontaneous and robust communication system linking the key institutions. This will gather and interpret vital information to assist decision-making and in transmitting these decisions to various constituents during crisis. India's nuclear forces and their command and control shall be organised for very high survivability against surprise attacks and for rapid punitive response. Thus, the principle of minimum deterrence is based on the maximum credibility of India's nuclear weapons, their effectiveness and survivability. The object of deterrence is to convince the adversary that the costs of seeking a military solution to its political problems will outweigh the benefits.

The credibility of a minimum deterrent capability must be further qualified by the-

- capability of a triad for launching a punitive second strike;
- communicating the will to the adversary that India can and will retaliate, and;
- resolve/determination to use the nuclear option to counter any first nuclear use

The Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs is noteworthy in that in the year 2002–2003 it dropped the word “minimum”. In a similar vein, the Defence Minister, Pranab Mukherjee in an interview to the *Press Trust of India* asserted that India’s “credible nuclear deterrence” is in place, thus, consciously dropping the word “minimum”.⁹ Is there an inherent tension between minimum deterrent and maximum credibility? Is India considering shedding a minimalist posture and adopting a more hawkish nuclear policy in its security interests? In a seminar held in New Delhi, it was stated that the deletion of the word “minimum” is intentional in light of the ambiguity over the definition of “unacceptable damage”.¹⁰ Another reason cited for the deletion is the “greater weightage...being attached to credibility”.¹¹ Despite such controversies, the concept of minimum deterrence has been strongly upheld by the strategic community. Major General (retired) Ashok Mehta noted, “...minimum deterrence and a no first use policy allow for the maintenance of a limited nuclear arsenal – warheads and delivery systems – and a small not too elaborate command and control structure. This makes the strategic deterrent affordable and prevents a nuclear arms race”.¹² Minimum deterrent is a relative term and every country has to develop this capability subject to an empirical analysis of its threat perspectives and adversaries’ potential. Minimum deterrence is not dependent on matching warhead to warhead but hinges on the capacity to survive a first attack and then retaliate with an assured second-strike. Thus, when faced with insistent demands from the US to quantify the concept of minimum deterrent, Prime Minister Vajpayee stated in the Parliament that minimum deterrence “is not a question of numbers”.¹³ It “implies [the] deployment of [nuclear] assets in a manner that ensures survivability and [the] capacity [for] an adequate response”.¹⁴

Thus, in quantitative terms, the notion of minimum deterrence is a purely academic one. The concept is dynamic and cannot be defined in fixed numerical terms. It also depends on the kind of nuclear adversary that India is facing – China, Pakistan being the main ones. Besides, with the passing of time, India might require fewer nuclear weapons. Therefore, the number is not static; it goes up and down. What is more relevant while discussing the concept of minimum deterrence is to quantify it in terms of its “credible” posture, which implies the adequate force structure and the survivability factor of the nuclear arsenal to impose a massive retaliation in the form of a second-strike on the adversaries. This is what is advocated in the nuclear doctrine.

No-First-Use

India's commitment to the NFU of nuclear weapons against nuclear-armed powers and the non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states would constitute integral components of its nuclear doctrine. Prime Minister Vajpayee, in the official paper, *Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy*, reiterated New Delhi's "readiness to discuss an NFU agreement [with Pakistan] as also with other countries, bilaterally, or in a collective forum".¹⁵ This commitment was reiterated in August 1998 when Vajpayee declared that India "will not be the first to use nuclear weapons. Having stated that, there remains no basis for their use against countries which do not have nuclear weapons".¹⁶ The doctrine makes it clear that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the threat of use of nuclear weapons. It states that India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with massive retaliation should deterrence fail. The prospect of inflicting unacceptable damage upon the aggressor would increase the efficacy of nuclear deterrence. The underlying objective of the NFU strategy is to promote crisis stability and propagate strategic restraint.¹⁷

India has committed itself to the NFU policy primarily because of five considerations. First, the NFU strategy projects India as a restrained power in nuclear matters. Following the May 1998 tests, India's declaration of NFU helped propagate an image of strategic restraint. Obviously, this entails enormous diplomatic advantage. New Delhi's NFU policy is an attempt at displaying moderation and responsibility. Second, a restrained nuclear weapons programme without tactical nuclear weapons and a complicated command and control system is economically a viable choice that provides an affordable deterrent. During the Cold War, the deployment pattern of the nuclear forces clearly indicated that they were ready to fight a nuclear war. India's NFU policy strongly rejects the concept of nuclear war fighting and, to that extent, considers it irrelevant that its nuclear warheads and missiles should be equated with that of its potential adversaries. New Delhi has lived with a nuclear Beijing since 1964 and has refrained from engaging in any arms race with China. India's nuclear doctrine pillared upon the NFU policy is exemplary and certainly enhances the prospects for peace, stability and security in the subcontinent. Third, the NFU policy offers military-strategic advantages. India's commitment to NFU will reassure Pakistan that it does not wish to threaten the existence of its neighbour. By extending an NFU offer to Islamabad, New Delhi seeks to implement a vital confidence-building measure between them. This could also facilitate a nuclear risk reduction measure and increase peace prospects within the subcontinent.

Strongly advocating the NFU policy, India is in favour of a totally un-caveated policy, with no reservation whatsoever on NFU.¹⁸ The nuclear weapons of India are meant for retaliation, only if New Delhi is attacked.¹⁹ Fourth, India's NFU strategy avoids requirement of nuclear arsenal at launch-ready deployment and thus, forswears brinkmanship in the early stages of conflict. The NFU policy is significant, precisely because it affords a more relaxed, safe and a less stressed command and control system. NFU facilitates greater political control over nuclear forces. Rapid response of nuclear forces requires greater delegation of authority to lower levels of command. This leads to inflexibility, particularly in war plans. During the Cold War, the US nuclear war plans—the Single Integrated Operation Plan (SIOP)—allowed the US President little choice of alternate sets of attack, all of which included grave nuclear offences. The US President could either ignore the war plans or risk a total nuclear war. Greater flexibility in war plans allows the political leadership alternatives such as attacks on individual targets as a response to a limited attack. Thus the NFU policy based on avoidance of deploying nuclear weapons at launch-on-warning posture and facilitating greater political control provides substantial benefits in terms of stability and safety, without diluting the capability of the deterrent.

The NFU principle has generated a lot of debate in both academic and strategic circles. The principle has been attacked episodically on several grounds. The Bharatiya Janata Party's **election manifesto** of 2014 had indicated a revisit of the doctrine "to make it relevant to challenges of current times". Cynics question the efficacy of the NFU on the ground that it holds little relevance as an effective strategic contrivance against Pakistan. It is believed to be a merely declaratory policy that is devoid of essential mandatory legitimacy and cannot be depended upon in real-life situations. While these criticisms cannot be ignored, the NFU policy does hold significant benefits.

The NFU doctrine is consistent with its strategic culture and mindful of the devastation that nuclear weapons can cause. India views nuclear weapons as political weapons and not as instruments of war fighting. Their sole purpose is to deter the threat of nuclear competition in the subcontinent. The NFU policy has served the nation well. As long as India's second-strike capability is not corroded, India need not abandon the NFU policy for a first-use posture. At the level of India's defence policy, the doctrine of NFU constitutes one of the most vital components of India's nuclear posture. Demonstrating India's non-aggressive position, the NFU doctrine seeks to outline crisis stability and strategic restraint.

Command and Control

The efficacy of a nuclear force depends on the capability of how it is commanded and controlled in times of crisis. The nuclear doctrine provides for an elaborate command and control structure. The command and control are the supporting infrastructure that makes a strategy of nuclear deterrence viable. An effective command and control system is indispensable to analyse options, formulate plans and implement them effectively. The nuclear doctrine established that the Prime Minister would head the National Command Authority (NCA) and the authority to release nuclear weapons shall be vested in the executive command of the highest political office. Given the nature of our constitutional system, the command and control of the nuclear weapons can hardly lie with anyone else. This is in total conformity with the constitutional system of India, which posits the responsibility of ultimate decision-making on the Prime Minister.

Unilateral Moratorium on Testing

After the May 1998 tests, the Indian scientific community was satisfied with the results and stated no further testing was required.²⁰ In a paper titled *Evolution of India's Nuclear Policy*, Prime Minister Vajpayee stated, "...in terms of technical capability, our scientists and engineers have the requisite resources to ensure a credible deterrent". Following this, the Prime Minister announced a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing as a measure to reinforce and reiterate its commitment to global nuclear disarmament.

Sixteen years have passed since India tested its nuclear devices in May 1998. Some former scientists of the DRDO had questioned the veracity of the results, but the DAE has transparently disclosed its yield results. The scientific community was fully convinced that India has acquired the relevant nuclear weapons capability. However, it has been argued from several quarters that to self-impose the unilateral moratorium on further testing is detrimental to India's security needs. With the passing of time, technology will scale further heights in all spheres, including the military. The Gulf War of 1991 is a classic example. Keeping in tune with future security imperatives, India has to undertake adequate measures for the security of its national interests. The need for testing is further intensified by virtue of India's commitment to NFU and minimum deterrence policies. India's nuclear doctrine abrogates any warmongering strategy and maintains its nuclear arsenal in a de-mated and passive posture. Nevertheless, the efficacy of India's deterrent posture is dependent upon its credibility in communicating its will to a potential enemy

that it will be retaliated against in a symmetrical attack, in case it has any ambitions of launching a nuclear attack upon India or its armed forces. Such a symmetrical attack against any attrition requires the development, production and stockpiling of modern state-of-art weapons that can inflict unacceptable damage upon the aggressor. For such purpose, the Indian forces would require weapons of high yield that will prove decisive in achieving their combat targets.

In addition, former DAE chief, P. Chidambaram stated that India has the capability to develop nuclear weapons of 200 kt yield. It is essential to develop a credible and efficient deterrent system to inflict punitive punishment on the adversary. For this, it is important that India has the best inventory of weapons system, tried and tested at its disposal to deter any future exigency. To this extent, India's voluntary test moratorium does not indicate cessation of testing. It only means "utmost restraint" in testing.²¹ India, of course, retains the right to resume testing if its national interests are at any point jeopardised.

Global, Verifiable and Non-discriminatory Nuclear Disarmament

India's Nuclear Doctrine has iterated its pledge to universal global disarmament. Despite the May 1998 tests and India's overt weaponisation, it continues to support the goal of nuclear disarmament. Ever since independence, India has urged the international community to fulfil the need for universal and time-bound nuclear disarmament. India has undertaken a number of initiatives in the sphere of nuclear disarmament. In 1978, India proposed an international convention that would prohibit the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons. In 1982, India called for a "nuclear freeze" - a prohibition on the production of fissile materials for weapons and related delivery systems. In 1988, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had put forward an "Action Plan" for phased elimination of all nuclear weapons within a specified time-period. India remains committed to the basic tenet of our foreign policy, that global elimination of nuclear weapons will enhance the security of India as well as all nations of the world.

India refused to sign the CTBT in 1996, which permits the existing powers to retain their nuclear monopoly while prohibiting others from testing and acquiring such weapons in future. India was forced to conduct the *Shakti* series of tests and go in for overt nuclear weaponisation because of the discriminatory policies of the nuclear powers and their refusal to respond positively to India's initiative for global disarmament. Despite weaponisation, the concept of phased elimination of all nuclear weapons has been, and still is, the cornerstone of India's nuclear policy. It was with this aim in view that India after the May 1998 tests declared a moratorium on further nuclear

testing. In addition, India is prepared to consider signing the CTBT and ready to join the talks in Geneva at the Conference on Disarmament on a fissile material cut-off, provided, the nuclear weapon states remove the discriminations and inequalities in these proposed treaties.

Conclusion

The aim of India's nuclear deterrence capability has been to safeguard itself against blackmail and coercive diplomacy of adversaries. Its doctrinal principles of minimum nuclear deterrence and NFU are consistent with India's declaration of a modest nuclear weapons policy. The official announcements, in the aftermath of the May 1998 tests indicated that India has set out on a pragmatic course of action. Sixteen years after the tests, the Indian government's policies reflect this approach substantially.

The CCS in January 2003, proposed certain modifications in the draft doctrine. The committee made clear that in future if any biological and chemical weapons are used to attack India then it would retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons. This did receive criticism from some quarters. Such an explicit link can reduce the deterrence value of nuclear weapons and may enhance the value of chemical weapons.

Having failed in its efforts for decades to achieve global nuclear disarmament, India had to reluctantly resort to go down the nuclear path. India remains committed to pursue disarmament as the ultimate guarantor of peace amongst nations.

Notes

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- ² Gopalji Malviya, 2004, "Nuclear Cloud Over South Asia India's Response", in Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema and Imtiaz H. Bokhari (eds.), *Arms Race and Nuclear Developments in South Asia*, Islamabad: Islamic Policy Research Institute, 2004, p.39.
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- ⁷ "Elements of EAM's Speech in Rajya Sabha", on December 16, 1998, at <http://www.meadev.gov.in/speeches/eamrep.htm>, (Accessed on January 12, 2003).
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- ¹⁷ Reshmi Kazi, "Efficacy of India's No-First-Use Policy", *Mainstream*, 42(39), p. 28.
- ¹⁸ K. Subrahmanyam, "Nuclear Tests: What Next?" *IIC Quarterly*, 34(10), p. 57.
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