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India's Doctrine of 'No First Use of Nuclear Weapons': Analysis of the Commitment and its Credibility

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Abstract:

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government of India adopted 'no first use' (NFU) doctrine when the country publicly conducted its first nuclear weapons test at Pokhran in 1998 and became a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS). This article demonstrates that the doctrine has served its expected purpose in the following years. That same year Pakistan also conducted nuclear weapons test following that of India. India described the 1974 test as a peaceful nuclear explosion. There is still some anxiety in India about the wisdom of this no first use of nuclear weapons doctrine. A section of scholars and strategists believe that India could have adopted the option of using its nuclear weapons first whenever the nation's defense requires it. The primary objective of India's nuclear weapons is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons against India. Taking into account India's hostility with Pakistan and China and India's quest for an independent foreign policy, this article examines the credibility of the nuclear doctrine of India as a deterrence of war. The article also explores the strategic aspects of India's advocacy for global nuclear disarmament.

Keywords: India, nuclear weapons, foreign policy, credibility, deterrence, strategic, disarmament

Introduction:

India conducted its first nuclear weapons test in 1998, codenamed 'Operation Shakti'. The erstwhile Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government immediately highlighted its decision of not using the nuclear weapons of India first in any conflict. This nuclear doctrine of 1999 was outlined in a draft report prepared by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB). This draft served as a blueprint for the official nuclear doctrine adopted in 2003 by the Union Government. This doctrine aims to make the nuclear shield of India more effective against any potential adversary. All subsequent governments of India have reiterated this doctrine.

A part of the doctrine (1999) states that "The fundamental purpose of Indian nuclear weapons is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons by any Sate or entity against India and its forces. India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail" (Menon 2016, 157). The doctrine further stated that India would not resort to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against States which did

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not possess nuclear weapons, or were not aligned with nuclear weapon states (NWS). There is still a question in India, particularly in military minds about the credibility of this commitment. However, India's nuclear doctrine itself is a product of its unique international security concerns – India's unique relations with China and Pakistan and other nuclear weapon states (NWS) of the world.

Objectives:

This research paper will deal with the following objectives:

1. To highlight the basic features of the 'no-first-use' nuclear weapons doctrine of India
2. To assess the credibility of India's nuclear doctrine in creating nuclear deterrence with special reference to its power relations with Pakistan and China
3. To explore the strategic aspect of India's advocacy for global nuclear disarmament

Methodology:

The study involves qualitative and analytical methodology. While preparing this paper, secondary data have been consulted. Various relevant books, journal articles, government websites and other credible online sources are treated as the source of secondary data.

Threat of Unabated Nuclear Proliferation in Asia:

In the aftermath of Independence, the Indian leaders, particularly Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of India, took a very vocal stand against nuclear weapons and nuclear proliferation. But being a modernist, Nehru also realised the role that nuclear energy and technology could play in national development.

China invaded India in October 1962, and after two years, China successfully conducted nuclear weapons test in October 1964. China immediately made a declaration to the world highlighting the no first use (NFU) policy. India refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968. Indira Gandhi, the erstwhile Prime Minister, and the other Indian leaders considered the treaty as discriminatory, because this treaty under the pretext of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, legitimised the nuclear monopoly of five countries – USA, Soviet Union, Britain, France and China, over the rest of the world. Since the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, India has been threatened several times with nuclear weapons, mainly by Pakistan, and once implicitly by USA, when its nuclear-armed aircraft carrier 'USS Enterprise' entered the Bay of Bengal to support the erstwhile West Pakistan against India. However, it is worth-mentioning that the USS Enterprise had also entered the Indian Ocean in 1962, to support India during the brief border war between India and China.

Rajesh Rajagopalan noted that even Nehru also thought to a lesser degree that nuclear weapons might play a crucial role in national defence if efforts at nuclear disarmament fail. These somewhat contradictory strands are visible with the subsequent political leaders and the Prime Ministers of India. Even the erstwhile Prime Minister Vajpayee, who encouraged the nuclear explosion of 1998, had sided with Morarji Desai two decades earlier in 1979 in voting against the rejuvenation of nuclear weapons program. However, some defence scientists played a key role in keeping the nuclear weapons program alive even when there was no proper

government support for such a program. By the late 1980s, it became clear that Pakistan had made rapid advances in the nuclear weapons program with Chinese technological assistance, and India also decided to work on nuclear program for military purpose.

No First Use Policy: A Strategic Choice

A 'no first use policy' is not always an easy or natural choice. During mid-1980s, Raja Ramanna, then chairperson of Atomic Energy Commission (1983-87) and Krishnaswami Sundarji, erstwhile Chief of the Army Staff (1986-88), wanted India to develop nuclear weapons. Sundarji believed that in future Indian atom bombs would be able to neutralise Chinese conventional superiority. However, Ramanna, a nuclear physicist, was aware of the practical effect of using nuclear weapons. He therefore saw the nuclear weapons as an enabler and equaliser (Menon, 2016, 160). For Ramanna, these are necessarily to be used as military weapons, but they were to be projected as deterrent, the threat of whose use would enable India to achieve political and military goals. In the following decades, India's conventional military position improved, and the idea of using nuclear weapon as military compulsion became less compelling. By the late 1990s, Atal Bihari Vajpayee came to a conclusion that India should develop nuclear weapons with a larger vision peace in India and its neighbourhood.

The no first use policy and the concept of assured retaliation naturally have several implications for India's nuclear strategy and posture:

1. The nuclear weapons are generally considered as weapons of deterrence rather than war-fighting weapons. Therefore, it becomes crucial for India that its rivals believe these weapons would be used if India is forced to do so.
2. If a state rules out first use of nuclear weapons, it needs to possess other means including conventional forces to deal with non-nuclear threats and challenges.
3. Finally, it becomes essential that India develops a genuine delivery triad on land, sea and air as soon as possible. The triad is designed to ensure a state's ability to retaliate with nuclear weapons even after a first strike by an adversary. A nuclear triad refers to nuclear weapons delivery system comprised of three components: land-based inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), known as "Boomers", and strategic aircraft with nuclear bombs and missiles. This structure ensures the survivability of India's credible (convincing) second-strike capability in case of a nuclear attack.
4. India's nuclear strategy is based on the principle of 'credible minimum deterrence'. Minimum deterrence is an application of deterrence theory in which a nation possesses no more nuclear weapons than is required to deter an adversary from attacking.

New Delhi wants to treat the nuclear weapons primarily as political weapons and not as war-fighting tools. It can be called the political symbolism of nuclear weapons which tends to override any prospective military use of nuclear weapons (Basrur 2001). However, from the Indian point of view, Pakistan treats their nuclear weapons as war-fighting tools, which are more connected to the military strategy of Pakistan, rather than being subjected to any doctrine.

India's Changed Nuclear Doctrine: from 'Punitive' to 'Massive' Retaliation

India's nuclear doctrine has undergone some changes in 2003. The 1999 doctrine was produced by the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), a group of non-governmental experts, and the Union Government also formally claimed that the doctrine was not the official doctrine. The NSAB document highlighted the need for a nuclear triad for India, which was not acknowledged by the government initially.

In January 2003, the government released a brief press statement that revealed some principles of the official nuclear doctrine of India. The statement noted that several aspects of the Indian nuclear doctrine was the same as in the 1999 doctrine, but some pledges especially that of 'no first use' and 'non-use against non-nuclear powers' had been diluted. The government also added some command-and-control aspects into the official doctrine. There are some three new inclusions in the official nuclear doctrine of 2003:

1. First was the inclusion of the principle of 'massive' retaliation to a nuclear attack on India. The 1999 doctrine had only talked of a 'punitive' and 'assured' retaliation that would cause 'unacceptable' damage. The reason or logic behind this change is still not clear. However, a plausible interpretation is that this was simply public rhetoric, especially since the press release came in the wake of India's failed attempt at coercive diplomacy to deal with Pakistan in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001.
2. The second significant change was the dilution of both India's NFU doctrine as well as the pledge not to attack non-nuclear weapon states (NNWS). But the 2003 version of the nuclear doctrine enables India to consider the use of nuclear weapons in response to a 'major attack' on India or its forces anywhere with chemical or biological weapons (CBW). This dilutes both the NFU pledge as well as the pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. It dilutes the NFU doctrine because India can use nuclear weapons 'first' against both the NWS and NNWS, if they decide to use chemical or biological weapons against India. For example, if Pakistan and even Bangladesh use chemical or biological weapons against India, India may use nuclear weapons in retaliation, though in such cases, India would also be violating its NFU doctrine.

Indian officials suggest mainly two reasons behind such changes. First, since India does not possess chemical and biological weapons, India has only nuclear weapons to deter potential use of such weapons against India. Moreover, a NNWS may also possess chemical and biological weapons. Secondly, these changes reflect the government's response to domestic criticism about the NFU doctrine being too weak to deal with potential threats. Writers like Rajesh Rajagopalan believe that the second reason is closer to the truth.

By the late 2002, the NDA government was feeling particularly frustrated with Pakistan's support for terror and India's inability to do much about it. Moreover, Operation Parakram (the military mobilization of 2001– 2002) did not bring any positive result. Therefore, a relatively aggressive nuclear doctrine may have been seen as one way of responding to this frustration.

Another argument is that government is trying to avoid the 'commitment trap' which may be created by India's strict moral or adherence to NFU doctrine. Scott Sagan had argued that making such a commitment may sometimes force decision-makers into using nuclear weapons unnecessarily, and that such a commitment may create credibility problems in the long run which will dilute the deterrence (Sagan 2000, 85-115).

Mitigating Vulnerability: Current Challenges in the Neighbourhood

The nuclear weapons of India are primarily aimed at preventing nuclear attack and blackmail. It can be said this strategic objective has been largely fulfilled. Before going overtly nuclear in 1998, India's position in the realm of international power-relations was weaker, and the country had been vulnerable to nuclear threats and blackmails since the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971. In this 21st Century, India's overt nuclear capability makes the country less vulnerable to such threats.

India-Pakistan deterrence

Pakistan has tried use nuclear deterrence to allow itself to undertake actions against India, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. The Kargil War (1999) was fought after one year of the nuclear tests of India and Pakistan. Pakistan miscalculated that its nuclear weapons would deter India from using conventional military forces against Pakistan's intrusion across line of control, and subsequently India and the world would come to the table of negotiation.

India responded militarily by using its conventional superiority to liberate the heights that the Pakistani troops had captured in disguise of 'Mujahideen'. Though Pakistani forces retreated from Kargil, it is worth-mentioning that Indian army and air force did not try to cross the international border to wage a full-scale war, unlike, they had done in the 1971-War to occupy Dhaka in the erstwhile East Pakistan. Under such circumstances, Islamabad seems to have drawn the conclusion that the Pakistan's nuclear deterrence compelled New Delhi to respect the Line of Control (Loc), which confined the conflict within Kargil to the advantage of Pakistan. Currently Islamabad seems to believe that Pakistan's nuclear capability permits Pakistan to trigger terrorist attacks on India, and unprovoked firing on Indian forces and civilians at the proximity of the LoC. Therefore, it can be said that India's nuclear deterrence has faced some limitations in dealing with Pakistan due to the fact that Pakistan also possesses a nuclear shield.

India-China deterrence:

China officially became a nuclear power state in October 1964 – two years after its short invasion of India in October 1962. However, the Indian and the Chinese leaders have never expressed about their respective nuclear capabilities and its potential use even in moments of considerable tension. During the 1967 border clashes at Sikkim, China was a declared NWS. During the Sumdorong Chu military standoff between India and China (1986-87), India was assumed to have some nuclear weapons, though it was covert. However, Shivsankar Menon, a former National Security Adviser of India, reiterated (2016) that the concern over nuclear weapons never figured in the bilateral exchanges between the two countries either to ease the relations or to pressurize each other.

However, one of the crucial factors guiding the nuclear deterrence of India is that China has consistently assisted Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs since the mid-1970s. This is the only known instance of a NWS (China) creating and sustaining another NWS in this world, and that too in its neighbourhood. Some strategists would like to say that the China-Pakistan collaboration is a part of China's long-term game of 'wei chi' – a strategic political behaviour to encircle the opponent. On the other hand, since 1970s, Pakistani physicist like Abdul Qadeer Khan, who is known as the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, have provided China with access to Western military and nuclear technology.

From the Indian point of view, Menon argues (2016) that the Chinese and Pakistani nuclear weapons programs are so closely linked and have been so for so long that the nuclear programs of these two neighbouring countries may be considered as one.

India's Quest for a Nuclear Weapon-Free World:

India is the only NWS to have waited for twenty-four years after demonstrating the ability to make nuclear weapons in 1974, and became overtly nuclear only in 1998. We do believe that all living species would be more secure in a world that is truly free of nuclear weapons and nuclear threats. However, at the same time, the decisions makers of India and the other countries have the responsibility to protect their people from nuclear threat. That is why many countries are working on their nuclear weapons either overtly or covertly.

The broader issue from an Indian point of view is whether the existing international non-proliferation regimes and disarmament efforts address our security concerns. Most of the decision-makers and security strategist of India still believe that these regimes do not address our most serious security concerns. Nuclear proliferation is a reality in Asia and the existing internal power-relations do not promise a way forward to nuclear disarmament. The United Nations Organisation (UNO) warned in the early 2024 that the world was drifting back to potential nuclear war amid the mounting tensions between Russia and China on the one hand, and US and Europe on the other. Foreign policy analyst like C. Raja Mohan believes that Delhi must order a comprehensive review of the regional atomic challenges and changing global nuclear dynamic, and find ways to modernise India's nuclear doctrine and arsenal, and to accelerate India's civilian nuclear energy programs (Mohan 2024). However, still these non-proliferation regimes have some utility for India. India and the rest world would be worse off without such regimes. In fact, India has an interest in improving these regimes. If India overtly ignores the global nuclear debate and disarmament efforts, India will risk being sidelined from the world's concerns.

Conclusion:

A military doctrine is less flexible, because apart from including some aspects of military strategy, it sets some moral standards to regulate military actions; whereas military strategy may be always flexible which changes according the demand of the changing military situation (Rajagopalan 2006). The decision-makers of a NWS may be tempted to use their nuclear weapons first in a given military situation, and will not wait for the potential first nuclear strike of the adversary, which means they will prefer to act first rather than conducting retaliatory or

reactionary strikes only afte:r being attacked by the adversary. The power of nuclear weapons has made a full-scale the war quite irrational between and among the superpowers and the other NWS – under all but the most extreme circumstances. Conventional military wisdom cannot be simply applied in the era of nuclear weapons, and the NWS are becoming more cautious in using their conventional military forces against each other. Concentration of force and surprise no longer guarantees complete victory, and a large-scale conventional military invasion from the either side will enhance the risk of massive nuclear retaliation. However, the real danger of nuclear proliferation elsewhere in the world is less than those from weaker civilian and political control over the nuclear programs of any country. From Indian point of view, Pakistan is a classic example of such a state, where the armed forces have a long-lasting tendency to overpower and overthrow the democratically elected national governments. It can be said that Pakistan's nuclear program remains a constant source of tactical worry for India, whereas the Chinese nuclear weapons and China-Pakistan atomic collaborations are major strategic concerns for India. One of the concerns raised by some Indian analyst is the ongoing effort of Pakistan to create 'full spectrum deterrence' against India, which is largely equivalent to the integration of the conventional and nuclear war-fighting programs. This integrative effort aims to deter the territorial penetration of an adversary with conventional superiority. Pakistan may build some tactical nuclear weapons, which are to be handed over to some junior officers of the armed forces for using them at the battlefield. Taking into account the changing dynamic of nuclear deterrence in its neighbourhood as well as across the world, India must opt for a comprehensive review of its civil and military nuclear programs. India has to find ways to make its nuclear doctrine more compatible with the military strategy. Moreover, India should work for accelerating its civil nuclear programs.

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