

Is It Time To Rethink India's Nuclear Doctrine?

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Abstract

This research paper aims to analyse the possible changes that can be made in India's new nuclear policy. The paper will start by examining the current nuclear policy of India, including its history and key features. It will then identify the factors that may necessitate a change in India's nuclear policy, such as shifts in the global geopolitical landscape, emerging threats, and technological advancements.

The paper will also explore the possible directions that India's nuclear policy can take. It will discuss different options, such as maintaining the current policy, expanding the nuclear arsenal, or adopting a more defensive posture. The paper will weigh the pros and cons of each option, including their implications for regional and global security, India's strategic interests, and its relations with other countries.

The findings of this research paper will be relevant for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners interested in India's nuclear policy and its implications for regional and global security. The paper will provide a comprehensive analysis of the possible changes in India's nuclear policy, their rationales, and their consequences. It will contribute to the ongoing debate on nuclear policy in India and beyond, and help shape the future trajectory of India's nuclear program.

INTRODUCTION

India's nuclear doctrine, officially known as the "Draft Nuclear Doctrine of India (DND)", was first made public in August 1999. The unofficial National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) created the DND. The Indian government quickly disowned it, even though many of its details faithfully followed earlier pronouncements made by the government, including well-known statements made in parliament about credible minimum deterrence and NFU. New Delhi published its official nuclear philosophy in January 2003. The doctrine outlines India's policy on nuclear weapons and their use and is based on the principles of "no first use," "massive retaliation," and "minimum credible deterrence." The doctrine also states that India will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states and

will only use them in response to a nuclear attack on Indian territory or armed forces. The doctrine has been periodically reviewed and updated, with the most recent update being in 2018. Given that it is usually regarded as being constrained, India's nuclear doctrine is crucial in determining nuclear stability in South Asia.

It is common for countries to revisit and update their nuclear doctrines as strategic circumstances change. India's nuclear doctrine, like any other doctrine, is a living document subject to review and revision as per the country's requirements.

There have been calls from experts and analysts for India to revisit its nuclear doctrine in light of changing strategic circumstances, particularly concerning the country's relations with its neighbours, particularly Pakistan and China. Some argue that India's "no first use" policy should be revisited, as it may not be appropriate in certain scenarios. Additionally, as the nature of warfare continues to evolve, India's doctrine should be updated to reflect the changing nature of warfare, including the use of cyber and space-based weapons.

However, it is ultimately up to the Indian government to decide whether or not to revisit the country's nuclear doctrine. Any changes would likely be made after careful consideration and consultation with experts and relevant stakeholders.

Fundamental principles of India's Nuclear Doctrine

The principles of India's nuclear doctrine, as outlined in the "Draft Nuclear Doctrine of India," include:

1. "No first use(NFU)" - India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike and will use nuclear weapons only in response to a nuclear attack on Indian territory or armed forces. India's NFU provides multiple advantages.

- a. The biggest benefit is that it does away with the expensive nuclear weapons infrastructure connected to a first-use doctrine.
 - b. It places the burden of escalation on the adversary while allowing India to defend itself.
 - c. Furthermore, New Delhi can restrict its response by refraining from threatening to use nuclear weapons in response to nuclear attacks. In addition, India doesn't necessarily require its nuclear forces to be on high alert, which is always dangerous.
 - d. NFU lowers the challenges and costs entailed by a complex command-and-control system.
 - e. The NFU also eliminates the requirement for technologies like Permissive Action Links, which are required to retain control over nuclear weapons if they are kept ready to use. It allows India to keep its weapons disassembled.
2. "Massive retaliation" - India will respond with a massive nuclear retaliation to a nuclear attack on Indian territory or armed forces.
 3. "Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD)" - India will maintain a minimum nuclear deterrent to ensure the country's security against nuclear threats. It refers to the number of nuclear forces India needs to deter potential nuclear adversaries. India's nuclear weapons are stored, disassembled and undeployed, a situation that comes near to virtual deterrence in terms of physical configuration. CMD fits well into India's general strategic culture.
 4. "No use against non-nuclear weapon states" - India will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states unless they collude with them.
 5. "Retention of the option of a retaliatory nuclear strike" - India will retain the option of a retaliatory nuclear strike in case of a chemical or biological weapon attack on Indian territory or armed forces.
 6. "Maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent" - India will always maintain a credible nuclear deterrent to deter the use and threat of nuclear weapons.
 7. "Continuous assessment and evolution" - India's nuclear doctrine will be continuously reviewed and updated as per the changing security scenario of the country.

Border disputes between India, China, and Pakistan have recently grown. China and Pakistan have been equally hostile to India, and their behaviour has also been unpredictable. One must also consider the Taliban's return to Afghanistan and open assistance from countries such as Pakistan and China. Another issue that has sparked our interest is the open discussion of utilising nuclear weapons in the unfolding Ukraine-Russia war. The stakes remain extremely high in Doklam, Pangong Tso, and Arunachal Pradesh, and the fact that China is also a nuclear opponent openly hostile to India raises the stakes. Furthermore, there is a distinct sense among many Indians that China is becoming a more formidable opponent than Pakistan. As a result, in such an international context, India must save time by not deciding on its nuclear programme. Even though we have not yet reached the point of nuclear war, common sense recommends that India rethink its nuclear policy to assess its relevance in the current geopolitical context.

There are several potential problems with India's nuclear doctrine as it stands. Some of these include:

1. "No first use" policy:

- a. Critics argue that India's "no first use" policy may not be appropriate in certain scenarios, particularly if India faces a conventional military threat from a nuclear-armed neighbour. Some argue that this policy could limit India's options in a crisis and may need to provide more of a deterrent. Some analysts call NFU "not a strategic choice, but a cultural one".
- b. India's NFU commitment is also conditional, and by making the NFU conditional, India lost an advantage without gaining any strategic or security value.
- c. NFU's posture is only viable for a nation that has unwavering faith in both the effectiveness of its crisis management system and the survival of its national nuclear forces, which are adequate to launch a devastating counterattack. India's strength is not in crisis management. Any emergency as serious as a nuclear attack is plainly beyond the capacity of the Indian bureaucratic structure.

- d. Pakistan is no longer forced to worry about an Indian nuclear response to terrorism or a small-scale conflict. Pakistan might even use TNWs without worrying about a strike from India. Pakistan, too, doesn't respect India's NFU commitment.

2. Credible Minimum Deterrence:

- a. Some experts argue that India's minimum credible deterrence policy is not well defined and is open to interpretation, which could lead to confusion and miscalculations in a crisis. While India has declared a "no first use" policy, it reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack or a major conventional attack. This ambiguity increases the risk of a nuclear conflict.
 - b. India has moved from deterrence to compellence in the aftermath of the terror attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001, claiming that the attack "seems to have opened the door to an open-ended future in which a minimalist conception of deterrence will no longer be the solitary plank of nuclear policy. Minimum deterrence is directly contradicted by compellence.
 - c. CMD, as envisioned by the NSAB in the DND, was an ephemeral notion that authorised "sizable and gradually more advanced nuclear forces."
 - d. With a policy of No First Use and Massive Retaliation, the concept of CMD must factor in 'survivability and sufficient numbers' that can inflict unacceptable damage.
3. Cyber and space-based weapons: As warfare continues to evolve, India's doctrine needs to address the potential use of cyber and space-based weapons, which could be a significant problem in future conflicts.
 4. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine: India's Nuclear doctrine does not consider that Pakistan maintains a "first use" policy and has more nuclear weapons than India. To address the threat posed by Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs), India may need to modify its huge retaliation nuclear strategy and adopt regulated retribution.

5. India's conventional military capabilities: India's nuclear doctrine does not adequately address the fact that India's conventional military capabilities are not at par with that of its nuclear-armed neighbours, China and Pakistan.

6. Massive Retaliation

- a. Some argue that India should consider substituting “punitive” for “massive” in the doctrine. They suggest that any Pakistani first use might be a very limited attack calibrated to avoid massive retaliation by India. They propose that India retaliate with low-level strikes in the case of Pakistan’s limited first use.
 - b. Several Indian analysts continue to use the phrase “massive retaliation” to describe Indian doctrine, even though the doctrine does not use this phrase, instead stating that “nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and calculated to inflict unacceptable damage.” Saying retaliation will be “massive” is not the same as saying it would be “huge”; most likely, the doctrine’s architects were unaware of the significance of “massive retaliation” in nuclear theology and merely wanted a tougher-sounding word to replace the DND’s phrase “punitive retaliation.”
7. **International non-proliferation regimes:** India’s nuclear doctrine does not consider India’s obligations under international non-proliferation regimes and may hinder India’s efforts to gain membership to these regimes. The NPT is an international treaty to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology. India is not a signatory to the NPT, which has led to suspicions about its nuclear weapons program. India’s decision not to sign the NPT has been driven by its perceived inequities, as the treaty places a disproportionate burden on non-nuclear-weapon states to forgo nuclear weapons. India has argued that the NPT is discriminatory and does not take into account the security concerns of non-nuclear-weapon states. As a result, many countries view India’s nuclear weapons program with suspicion, especially those that are signatories to the NPT.
8. **Safety and Security:** India’s nuclear weapons program faces significant challenges in ensuring the safety and security of its nuclear weapons and materials. There have been reports of security

breaches and thefts of nuclear materials, raising concerns about the possibility of nuclear terrorism. India has taken steps to improve the security of its nuclear facilities and materials, but there is still a risk of theft or sabotage. India also has many nuclear weapons, which increases the risk of an accidental launch or unauthorised use.

9. Economic Costs: India's nuclear weapons program has come at a high economic cost. The funds allocated to nuclear weapons could have been used to address the country's pressing social and economic issues, such as poverty, healthcare, and education. The cost of maintaining and upgrading India's nuclear arsenal is also a significant burden on the country's economy. Critics argue that the economic costs of the nuclear program outweigh any potential benefits and that the funds could be better spent on addressing social and economic challenges.

These are just a few possible criticisms of the doctrine, and different experts may have different opinions.

Significance of the notion of peace

"Peace" is an important aspect of India's nuclear doctrine, as the doctrine states that nuclear weapons are only to be used as a last resort in the event of a nuclear attack on Indian territory or armed forces. The doctrine emphasises that India's nuclear weapons are not to be used for aggressive or offensive purposes but rather as a deterrent to prevent the use of nuclear weapons against India.

The doctrine also states that India will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states and will only use them in response to a nuclear attack. This aligns with India's long-standing policy of advocating for global disarmament and eliminating nuclear weapons.

Furthermore, the doctrine emphasises the need to maintain peace and stability in the region by continuously assessing and evolving the doctrine. This aligns with India's foreign policy of maintaining good relations with its neighbours and promoting regional peace and stability.

In summary, the significance of peace in India's nuclear doctrine is that it is a key principle in India's approach to nuclear weapons, and the doctrine is based on the idea that nuclear weapons should only be used as a last resort to deter nuclear attacks and to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Volatility of geo-politics and the challenges it poses for India

The importance of nuclear power and nuclear modernisation is only set to increase in the coming years. With the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, both super-powers (USA and Russia) have not withheld from showcasing their military prowess. However, behind the scenes, it wouldn't be impossible to think that nuclear alertness encircles both of the countries.

Moreover, The United States desires to limit Russia's power in international affairs, but the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine has proven that the US will not act as a shield for any of its allies, quasi-allies, or strategic partners (e.g. Japan, South Korea, Ukraine, Taiwan, India) when it comes to either nuclear or other forms of aggression. Hence, infusing a proactive approach towards nuclear building infrastructure mainly in the Asian continent.

China, however, poses the biggest threat to India in terms of nuclear belligerence. The rapid militarization wherein It has undergone a significant reorganisation of its strategic forces while continuing the "NFU" strategy, and by 2030, it plans to increase its nuclear arsenal from the present 350 warheads to 1,000 warheads. Also, it has gradually substituted mobile missile launchers with warheads equipped with Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRV) for its salvo-based ICBMs. With regard to the United States and India, China's recently developed Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (DF-17) and improved nuclear-armed IRBMs (DF-26) and ICBMs (DF-41) have further complicated the nuclear deterrent equation.

Moreover, In order to counter the "superiority of India's conventional forces," Pakistan uses nuclear weapons. Pakistan's military leaders have consciously tried to project the illogical strategy of "wider the

conventional asymmetry, lower the nuclear threshold," which has slowly turned into a visceral practise of waging a sub-conventional war against India under threats of nuclear escalation. The more India considers conventional military operations, the more Pakistani authorities will invoke the spectre of first use of nuclear weapons, driven by the "rationally illogical nuclear strategy."

Because of the fact that it is bordered by two nuclear-armed enemies, India's geostrategic situation makes it particularly vulnerable. India has endured the Pakistani sub-conventional war for years, despite Pakistan's uncertain first use doctrine and low first use threshold for its TNWs. Yet, China, the world's fastest-rising nuclear power, is attempting to impose its will along the tense India-China border, raising the risk of armed conflict. In light of these developments, some strategic analysts believe that the overall strategic deterrent balance with respect to China and Pakistan needs to be reviewed.

With all this in context, it becomes absolutely pertinent for India to rethink its No First Use policy. Not in a way that India completely takes a 360 degree turn and deviates from hallmarks of 'peace' and 'harmony', but in a way that India becomes a pro-active agent and doesn't just react in a defensive way.

Some suggestions for repairing India's nuclear doctrine include:

1. Reviewing and updating the "no first use" policy: Some experts argue that India should review its "no first use" policy in light of the changing strategic environment and the potential for nuclear weapons to be used in a limited or tactical manner.
2. Developing a more robust command and control system: India should strengthen its command and control system to ensure that nuclear weapons are used only as a last resort and in a controlled and responsible manner.
3. Building a more robust missile defence system: India should invest in developing a more robust missile defence system to protect itself from potential missile attacks.

4. Building stronger international partnerships: India should work closely with other countries and international organisations to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons and promote global nuclear disarmament.
5. Improving transparency and communication: India should increase transparency and communication with other countries and international organisations to build trust and reduce the risk of nuclear misunderstandings or accidents.
6. Periodic Review: Annual periodic review should be done and policy should be reassessed keeping in mind the change and developments in the global arena and in adversaries' arsenals.

These are just a few suggestions. Any action taken on India's nuclear doctrine should be based on a thorough review and consultation with experts in nuclear strategy and international relations.

Conclusion

There is a general agreement in the Indian strategic community that India's nuclear doctrine needs to be periodically re-evaluated. However, no consensus has been reached on any revision's direction. The dominant opinion is that India should maintain its "no first use" policy. However, some moderates would like to reorient the doctrine towards the "credible minimum deterrence" approach, while some expansionists would prefer a more flexible approach to nuclear force expansion. Regarding tactical weapons, the predominant opinion is that India can keep its doctrine the same to deal with Pakistan's TNWs. Public debates about the doctrine may not be decisive in driving changes to India's official policy, as political leadership may not pay sufficient attention to military and defence scientific bureaucracies. While India is unlikely to radically alter its existing nuclear doctrine, a new edition may be released, given the need for periodic review and more information. A new edition could correct some errors and contradictions, strengthening the doctrine. India's nuclear policy has changed gradually rather than suddenly, and it is not likely to change dramatically in the near future. India's

leaders and political system are cautious and avoid taking risks, and the country faces no significant security threats. Therefore, India has little reason to rapidly change its nuclear policy. However, India will also be cautious in advancing the nuclear arms control and disarmament agenda. It is unlikely that India will sign the CTBT or the FMCT if presented to them in the next few years. Additionally, India is not expected to conduct more nuclear tests or significantly increase its nuclear arsenal. Over the next decade, India will gradually enhance the size of its nuclear arsenal with ballistic missiles with a range of over 6,000 kilometres and possibly one or two submarines capable of launching long-range ballistic missiles. India has been seeking BMDs for over ten years, and while they may buy or develop a BMD system, it is not expected to be deployed anytime soon. India will likely continue campaigning for nuclear disarmament and worry about negating its conventional military deterrent. Still, a solution to this problem is unlikely to be found immediately.

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