

Indian Nuclear Doctrine – A Re-look

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Introduction

Henry Kissinger, the noted expert on nuclear strategy, had commented that only a doctrine which defined the purpose of these weapons and the kind of war to which they were to be employed permitted a rational choice.¹ Doctrine enables decision makers to initiate a considered response. Lack of doctrine leads to improvisation which is not desirable, especially in a possible nuclear stand-off or confrontation. A doctrine is formulated in the context of a given set of variables at a given time. Hence, it needs to be periodically reviewed and, if necessary, updated in the light of new challenges as also possible changes in regional and international environment.

Reasons for Review

There are several reasons why such a revision has become necessary in the case of India. Regional and global environment has changed rapidly in the context of India. India's Nuclear Doctrine (IND) was first formulated in 1998-99 and released for debate in 2003. It was essentially Pakistan-focussed. Today, India's region, in the context of nuclear deterrence, stretches from the Gulf to the Asia-Pacific.

As noted, when IND was first formulated, India's nuclear deterrence was geared to counter the nuclear threat posed by Pakistan alone. Since then, due to India's success in developing medium range and long-range SSMs like Agni III and Agni V, and proposal to develop still more sophisticated Agni VI ICBM, as also the possible deployment of high performance aircraft like Su-30, with inflight refuelling facility, China too has entered as a factor in determining IND. Unlike Pakistan, China is a much stronger military power both in terms of conventional as also nuclear war fighting capability.

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International environment has also altered greatly in favour of India since 1998-99. During the Clinton era, the USA was almost hostile to nuclear weaponisation as also to the development of Agni II missile by India. Now, it has virtually given up its hostility. With the USA gradually disengaging itself from Afghanistan and refocussing on the Asia-Pacific, India is being seen by some as a potential interest partner in the US policy of containing China.

While terrorism was always considered as a threat, fear of nuclear proliferation *via* Pakistan is causing concern. The growing apprehension that at least some of the fissile material might fall into the hands of elements that belong to or sympathise with radical Islamic groups, has lent credence to the potential threat posed by these non-state actors, be they state-sponsored or not, of threatening others with nuclear blackmail if not its actual use. IND, thus, needs to factor in not only role of state actors but also of such non-state actors.

Another reason for a re-look at IND is the need to correct misinterpretations that have got associated with terms like *no-first use* (NFU), *second strike*, *minimum credible deterrence* (MCD) etc.

India's Nuclear Doctrine – Backdrop

Though India had exploded its nuclear device in 1974, it took a long time to weaponise it. It is not revealed as to when India acquired that capability. On 11 May 1998 the day of Pokhran II, Brijesh Mishra, Principal Secretary to Indian Prime Minister, said that these tests had established that India had a proven capability for a weaponised nuclear programme.² Pakistan, to assert that it too had that capability, followed suit by publicly demonstrating its nuclear weapon capability soon after Pokhran II.

India's decision to go nuclear provoked severe adverse international responses, especially from the USA. One possible reason for India to formulate and publicise its nuclear doctrine was to mitigate the intensity of that hostility. In that context, Brijesh Mishra, while addressing a select group of journalists, had said that the structure of India's nuclear forces and the operational doctrine guiding them would be rooted in the broad principles of minimum deterrence and nuclear NFU.³ K Subrahmanyam, who was credited to have a role in formulating India's nuclear doctrine,

also underlined these two points in his article in India International Centre Quarterly.⁴

IND was drafted in June 1998 by a 27-member National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) under the Chairmanship of K Subrahmanyam. The Board comprised of non-official experts and had only an advisory role. Thus, formally speaking, the doctrine had no official stamp upon it except that it was released by Brijesh Mishra who was the then National Security Adviser as also Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister AB Vajpayee. The doctrine, among other things, outlined the broad principles for the development, deployment and employment of India's nuclear force and was intended to serve as a basis for the policy and strategy concerning force structure, deployment and employment of nuclear forces.⁵

Shri Jaswant Singh, the then Foreign Minister, in an exclusive interview to S Raja Mohan, made it very explicit that the IND prepared by the NSAB was not an official nuclear doctrine. It was released to the public for a wider debate and, thus, was not a policy document of the Government of India. When asked about the essence and thinking on India's doctrine, Jaswant Singh said that key elements of India's nuclear policy were spelt out by the Prime Minister in the Parliament in December 1998. He recapitulated them briefly as follows. India shall maintain a minimum nuclear deterrence and shall undertake necessary measures to ensure its credibility. India had declared a policy of NFU. Moreover, India would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. Also, India shall not enter into an arms race. India's commitment to global nuclear disarmament would remain undiluted.

Jaswant Singh also listed three other points that were not part of Prime Minister's speech in the Parliament but were related to India's nuclear policy. The first was that India had declared a moratorium on undertaking any further underground nuclear tests. He, however, insisted that R&D activities that included computer simulation and sub-critical tests would be conducted as and when necessary. The second point that was made by Jaswant Singh in his interview with C Raja Mohan was that India would continue further development of extended-range Agni missile. He added that additional flight testing would be undertaken in a manner that was non-provocative, transparent and consistent with established

international norms and practices. Lastly, he said that India would seek to negotiate confidence building measures, both in the conventional and nuclear fields, with the aim of reducing lack of trust in the region.⁶

Confusion over Terms

Some terms like NFU, minimum credible deterrence (MCD) and second strike, that had got associated with IND, have evoked serious comments. They were probably used at that time to ward off international criticism of India's gesture of publicly defying efforts by some great powers, mostly from the West, to impose a non-proliferation regime upon states that had not signed the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). India had publicly defied them by conducting Pokhran II. Though Pakistan too followed suit, it was India that was targeted most virulently. Use of terms like NFU, MCD was probably designed to justify India's nuclear weaponisation while simultaneously projecting a non-aggressive posture. But, these very terms drew maximum criticism. It is time that IND is gradually disassociated with these terms in the light of changing regional and global environment.

Few took India's offer of NFU seriously even in 1998. Pakistan rejected it outright. The entire nuclear deterrence of Pakistan was designed to deny India its advantage *vis-à-vis* conventional weapons. Hence, Pakistan had publicly proclaimed that it would exercise its nuclear option to deter India's conventional warfare capability. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sartaz Aziz reiterated that position on 19 August 1999 when he warned that a growing conventional imbalance would intensify Islamabad's dependence upon its nuclear capability to deter India.⁷

There are examples of other nuclear weapon powers that had earlier declared NFU as a policy, altering their stand and threatening to use nuclear weapon in the context of asymmetry in conventional forces. Russia, in 1993, reneged on the earlier Soviet pledge of NFU and reserved the right to use nuclear weapon in response to a large-scale conventional attack by NATO forces. That policy was reiterated in 2000 in Russia's military doctrine.⁸

China had announced NFU after its nuclear weapon test in 1964. It was reiterated in 1995 even when it was becoming clear that India was embarking on the path of acquiring nuclear deterrence. But, in 2005, Major-General Zhu Chenghu, in a press interview, said that China would use nuclear weapons if it was

attacked with highly sophisticated conventional weapons.⁹ It is possible that the Chinese were warning the USA against repeating Iraq *vis-à-vis* China. China reiterated that policy in 2011.

Kyodo, a Japanese news agency, revealed that Chinese policy called 'Lowering the Threshold of Nuclear Threat' stated that PLA's Strategic Missile Forces would readjust the nuclear threat policy if a nuclear missile possessing country carried out a series of air strikes against key strategic targets in China with absolutely superior conventional weapons.¹⁰ That statement could even be India-specific; since by 2011, India had started deploying Su-30 aircraft in the context of China, besides proposing to develop longer range missiles like Agni V. Thus, even China, that is a nuclear weapon power and has a strong conventional weapon capability, has put conditions on its NFU policy.

India, in its nuclear doctrine, has also made some exceptions to its NFU policy. IND has made nuclear deterrence a part of India's overall weapons of mass destruction (WMD) threat. IND clearly states that India would reserve the right to use nuclear option in the event of a major attack against India or Indian armed forces anywhere by biological and chemical weapons. Is it possible to extend the scope of the exception to enable India to use its nuclear option in case of gross asymmetry in conventional forces as was done by Russia and China?

IND, when it was first released, was Pakistan-focused. India's position on NFU was more in the context of Pakistan since India had an edge over Pakistan in the context of conventional warfare. It could well afford the concept of NFU. By contrast, Pakistan had created its nuclear capability to counter India's edge in conventional warfare. India's NFU concept, thus, put the onus of resorting to nuclear threat on Pakistan. No wonder Pakistan refused to accept that concept. But, is the concept of NFU equally valid in the case of China? Not only China has advantage over India in the case of nuclear but also conventional warfare. It has also said that it would, if need be, resort to use of nuclear weapon if its strategic targets were subjected to superior air strikes.

India also needs to keep its nuclear option open in case it is subjected to a massive conventional strike that is likely to adversely affect its strategic interests and territorial integrity. If Russia and China can modify their concept of NFU in this context, India cannot be blamed for taking such a step.

IND says that nuclear weapons will *only* be used in *retaliation against nuclear attack*. Phrases *only* and *retaliation* against nuclear strike need to be revised in the light of altered environment so as to free India from its self-imposed limitation in the use or *threat to use* nuclear deterrence in pursuance of its national interests. The revised version can include, “Indian nuclear weapons will be employed in the event of use or threat to use nuclear weapon against India on its forces anywhere. India’s response will be massive and designed to inflict maximum damage on the adversary.”

The second point that needs to be refuted strongly is the linkage by some commentators of India’s nuclear strike with second strike. Nowhere does IND use the term second strike. It, however, does mention that India’s nuclear retaliation to a *first* strike will be massive. Thus, the term used is massive retaliation and not second strike. The confusion arises partly because of the policy of NFU as also because of calling the adversary’s nuclear attack as first strike. The confusion can be easily removed by substituting the term first strike with nuclear strike.

Nuclear deterrence can be broadly classified under two heads; pre-emptive and punitive. Pakistan has, time and again, reiterated its policy of pre-emptive deterrence. Since IND has reiterated NFU, Indian nuclear strategy is restricted to punitive deterrence. IND states that Indian response to a nuclear strike will be massive. Thus, the term strike (by adversary) becomes the core for determining India’s nuclear deterrence. How does one define nuclear strike? Unlike conventional war or even in the case of manned nuclear bombers, that can be recalled, nuclear missiles, once launched, cannot be recalled. Thus, does strike commence once the missile is launched or after it has hit the target? Since the missile cannot be recalled, the term strike should logically be associated with the launch of the missile.

Even if one takes that as the benchmark for determining nuclear strike and subsequent steps for launching massive retaliation (punitive deterrence), still the time span for effective response is limited, in the case of South Asia, to a narrow margin of 3-7 minutes only. Does India have the capability to detect the launch, communicate it to appropriate decision-making authorities

for taking final decision to retaliate within a span of 3-7 minutes? Thus, whether one likes it or not India's real and effective capability for conveying a convincing punitive response will still depend largely upon the credibility of its second strike capability.

Another phrase that needs to be reviewed is MCD. It is vague and hence subject to conflicting interpretations. This phrase can be faulted on several counts. MCD had indirectly got associated with NFU and massive destruction of the adversary. That meant that India's command and control structure as also its nuclear strike capability will not only survive the so-called first strike of the adversary but will also retain its capability to launch a retaliatory strike that is capable of inflicting unacceptable damage on the adversary. Hence, it meant that India must possess nuclear capability that is large enough to deter adversary from launching any nuclear strike. That makes the term 'minimum' superfluous if not contradictory to the ethos of IND.

No one will deny the fact that deterrence to be effective has to be credible. But that adjective itself defies exactitude because it is subject to different assessments by those who want to deter and those who need to be deterred. Adjective minimum only adds to the confusion.

Hypothetically, can 120 SSMs of different types deter Pakistan that seems to be bent upon an arms race to overtake India in the field of tactical SSM, strategic SSMs and nuclear capable cruise missiles, and which never ceases to flout its nuclear capability and intention to deter India from using even its conventional warfare capability? Can India pose a credible deterrence to China with a nuclear force level of 20 Agni II/III, 10 Agni V and 5 Agni VI missiles? Can India claim that mix as its MCD *vis-à-vis* China since it cannot enter into an arms race with China under the present conditions as it can do in the case of Pakistan.

Hence, does India need to incorporate MCD concept *vis-à-vis* China and balanced nuclear force concept *vis-à-vis* Pakistan in its revised nuclear doctrine? The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on January 4, 2003, had reviewed the IND.¹¹ In that review it had totally ignored the term MCD. Now, in 2013, we need to once again review IND and re-examine the relevance of terms like MCD and credible punitive deterrence (CPD) in the context of China and Pakistan respectively.

Another criticism of the term minimum is that it is not quantifiable but is related to adversary's capability to fight a nuclear war. For example, what could have been considered minimum and credible in 1999 or even in 2003 may not be so in 2013. Thus, India will have to constantly anticipate capability of adversaries and relate its so-called MCD to their nuclear strategy. Hence, India's nuclear strategy will only keep on responding to moves of the adversaries instead of charting its own course and let adversaries respond to it. The term MCD is also difficult to define. Who decides whether it is credible, India or its adversaries?

IND was formulated in 1999 or at best in 2003 when India's nuclear strategy was largely Pakistan-focussed. Now, China has also emerged as a variable in determining India's nuclear strategy. Can India have a single norm to determine MCD or will it evolve separate norms for the two potential nuclear adversaries. It must be underlined that India's threat perception, especially on nuclear confrontation, differs *vis-à-vis* the two countries. IND needs to provide for that so that it does not send wrong signals to either of them.

If IND was aimed at reassuring adversaries and thereby preventing an arms race, it has failed in its objective as far as Pakistan is concerned. One witnesses a sustained growth, both in terms of quality and quantity, of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems in South Asia. As per details provided in the *Military Balance*, in 2005 India had about 45 SSMs of the Prithvi series and about 24 SSMs of the Agni series; a total of 69 SSMS. Pakistan was reported to have about the same numbers. By 2010, the number had increased to about 60 SSMs of the Prithvi series, about 100 of Agni-I and 25 of Agni II series; a total of 185 SSMs. Pakistan had about 105 Hatf I/II, 50 Hatf III, 25 Ghaury missiles and 10 Shaheen SSMs, a total of 190 SSMs.¹² Since then both the countries have been not only updating their delivery system by adding new missile systems but also improving upon their quality.

There are reports that India has tested *Prahar*, a 180-km range missile, designed to replace the Prithvi series of that range. It has quick response time and is mounted on vehicle that can carry four such missiles.¹³ If these specifications are true then *Prahar* can also serve as a tactical SSM, a counter to Nasr of Pakistan. India is also qualitatively improving its Agni II and III SSMs. It has not only launched Agni V, an ICBM, but is reported

to be developing Agni VI, a longer range ICBM with capability to launch multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs). It is also reported to be working on *Nirbhay*, a 1,000 km range cruise missile. In the meanwhile, Pakistan has inducted Nasr as a tactical level nuclear-armed SSM as also *Babur* and Raad cruise missiles. The arms race goes on.

IND – Points for Review

It is necessary that IND if and when revised needs to address two different types of challenges; from Pakistan and China. There is a basic difference between the approaches of India and Pakistan towards nuclear deterrence. CCS's review of IND in 2003 had emphasised the retaliatory or punitive aspect of India's nuclear strategy *vis-à-vis* Pakistan. By contrast, Pakistan's strategy is based upon threat of pre-emptive nuclear strike as deterrence not only *vis-à-vis* nuclear strategy but also conventional threat. Indian decision-makers have so far refused at least publicly, to base India's nuclear strategy upon pre-emptive (i.e. first strike) deterrence but have emphasised upon credible retaliatory or punitive deterrence as the basis of its strategy.

Such a policy *ipso facto* requires that India must not only demonstrate a credible or convincing retaliatory or punitive capability for the proposed massive retaliation after absorbing the adversary's nuclear strike but also a decision-making authority as well as command and control mechanism, that can be effectively activated within a short time span of 3-7 minutes, as a part of its credible punitive deterrence (CPD) strategy. Indian decision makers will also need, in that context, to make a fine distinction between nuclear launch based upon pre-emption, on warning or on actual launch. Is India's retaliatory capability suitably geared and does IND reflect the same?

When IND was formulated it was largely Pakistan-focussed. India had neither the resources nor the intention to openly pursue a policy of nuclear confrontation *vis-à-vis* China. But, by 2012, by developing *Agni V* (and working on *Agni VI*) as also the decision to arm its SSBN with long-range SLBMs, India is sending signals that it is preparing for a possible nuclear deterrence *vis-à-vis* China also. Hence, India needs a nuclear doctrine that is also China focused.

Of course, India's relations with China are of a different nature than that with Pakistan. But, it needs to be underlined that China is, since a long time, pursuing a policy of confronting India directly on what can be called a low key but is doing its best since long to assist Pakistan to act as a proxy against India. This is true not only about its significant support to Pakistan in the field of conventional but also nuclear warfare. How does India define its nuclear doctrine to deal with two different sets of threats; from Pakistan and from China? Is its present doctrine sufficient to address these twin challenges or does it need to be reviewed and, if need be, revised in the light of new developments?

Doctrines are not sacrosanct and need to be adjusted in the light of new challenges and opportunities. That is true of India as well. It is possible that Indian decision makers have made suitable modifications. If so, as the CCS had done a decade ago in 2003, they have not been shared with the public so far. One wonders why?

Endnotes

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