

Revisiting India's Nuclear Doctrine: Is It Necessary?

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Summary

“Credible minimum deterrence” is the cornerstone of India’s nuclear doctrine. It, used in conjunction with the concepts of “No First Use” (NFU) and “Non Use” against nuclear weapon states, clearly indicates that India envisages its nuclear weapons as only a deterrent and not as a means to threaten others.

In determining whether or not it is necessary to revisit India's nuclear doctrine it would be relevant to examine how it evolved, its main features, the reasons behind the calls to revisit it and the factors which militate against so doing.

Evolution of India's Nuclear Doctrine:

India's nuclear doctrine was first enunciated following a Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting in January 2003 - over four and a half years after the May 1998 tests. It contained few surprises being largely built around the pronouncements made by Atal Bihari Vajpayee following the tests to the effect that India's nuclear weapons were meant only for self defence, that India was not interested in arms racing, and encapsulating concepts such as "no first use" of nuclear weapons and their "non use" against non nuclear weapon states. Apart from these pronouncements, several entities, notably the Armed Forces, the National Security Council Secretariat and the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), made detailed contributions to the Government, on the nuclear doctrine, through 1999 and 2000, which were considered by it in firming up its views on the subject.

Main Features of India's Nuclear Doctrine:

The main features of India's nuclear doctrine were summarized as follows in the CCS press release of January 4th 2003:

- i. Building and maintaining a **credible minimum deterrent**;
- ii. A "**No First Use**" posture; nuclear weapons to be used only "in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere";
- iii. Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be "**massive**" and designed to inflict "**unacceptable damage**".
- iv. Nuclear retaliatory attacks to be authorized only by **civilian political leadership** through the Nuclear Command Authority.
- v. **Non use** of nuclear weapons against non nuclear weapon states.
- vi. India to retain option of **retaliating with nuclear weapons** in the event of a major attack against it with **biological or chemical weapons**;
- vii. **Continuance of strict controls** on export of nuclear and missile related materials and technologies, participation in **FMCT negotiations, continued moratorium on testing**;
- viii. **Continued commitment to goal of nuclear weapon free world**, through global, verifiable and non discriminatory disarmament.

Expose on “Credible Minimum Deterrent”:

The concept of “credible minimum deterrence” is the cornerstone of India’s nuclear doctrine. It, used in conjunction with the concepts of “No First Use” (NFU) and “Non Use” against nuclear weapon states, clearly indicates that India envisages its nuclear weapons as only a deterrent merely for defensive purposes and not as a means to threaten others, that it is not in the business of building up a huge arsenal and that it will not engage in arms racing.

The concept, however, also recognizes that for deterrence to be effective it must be “credible”.

The prerequisites for the credibility of our deterrent in the context of our nuclear doctrine may be listed as follows:

- **Sufficient and Survivable** nuclear forces both in terms of warheads and means of delivery able to inflict **unacceptable damage**;
- **Nuclear Forces must be operationally prepared at all times**;
- **Effective Intelligence and Early Warning Capabilities**;
- **A Robust Command and Control System**;
- **The Will to Employ Nuclear Forces**;
- **Communication of Deterrence Capability**.

The **size and nature** of India’s nuclear arsenal would essentially have to be a function of its threat perceptions, its being able to absorb a first strike (on account of its no first use commitment) and thereafter retaining the capability of inflicting “unacceptable damage”. India’s current security environment is by no means rosy. Accordingly, a sizeable nuclear weapons arsenal is essential as we need to factor in the possibility that the same would undergo a substantial degradation, despite all precautions, in a first strike, that some of our own attacks could be negated by defensive measures and above all what we have to inflict is “massive” and “unacceptable damage”. The **survivability** of our nuclear forces would need to be ensured by a combination of multiple redundant systems, mobility, dispersion, and deception. This also requires that India’s nuclear forces are based on a **triad** of aircraft, mobile land based missiles and sea based assets.

The need for **operational preparedness** at all times of the nuclear forces in order for our nuclear deterrent to be credible is self evident. It has been ensured by the creation of a C-in-C Strategic Forces Command to manage and administer our Strategic Forces. He functions under the overall control of the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee who is the channel of communication between him and the Government.

Effective Intelligence and Early Warning Capabilities always important in any conflict are critical in the context of a nuclear attack not merely as a means to counter it but also for purposes of retaliation. An apex techint organization notably the NTRO has been set up which would *inter alia* provide the required intelligence for this purpose.

Robust Command and Control System is essential for the credibility of deterrence. India has for this purpose established a Nuclear Command Authority comprising a Political Council chaired by the Prime Minister and an Executive Council chaired by the National Security Advisor. In keeping with the stipulation in our Nuclear Doctrine the Political Council is the sole body which can authorize the use of nuclear weapons. The role of the Executive Council is to provide inputs for decision making by the Nuclear Command Authority and to execute the directives given to it by the Political Council. The fact that the survivability of the command and control system has not been lost sight of is reflected in the press release of January 4th 2003 which indicated that the CCS "reviewed and approved the arrangements for alternate chains of command for retaliatory strikes in all eventualities".

The demands on India's Command and Control system as indeed on its Strategic Forces Command have been simplified due to the nature of its nuclear doctrine. Whereas most nuclear weapon states contemplate the possibility of escalatory nuclear war fighting scenarios the Indian doctrine essentially caters for massive Indian nuclear retaliation in the eventuality of a nuclear attack on it or on its forces. In essence, as per the Indian doctrine, if India or its forces are attacked with nuclear weapons it would more or less automatically unleash a devastating nuclear attack in retaliation. No prolonged nuclear war fighting scenarios are envisaged. This enormously eases the task of the Indian nuclear command, control and communications systems and greatly reduces the costs incurred thereon.

It is not sufficient to have a deterrence capability but also be perceived to have it as well as the will to use nuclear weapons if required to do so. In other words one must **communicate or project** the same to all concerned. Regrettably, insufficient attention has been paid to this aspect of establishing the credibility of our nuclear deterrent.

Reason for calls to revisit the nuclear doctrine:

The major factor behind the questioning of the Nuclear Doctrine stems from concerns about NFU. Dissatisfaction with our NFU posture is not new. *Ab initio*, in discussions on this in the NSAB a case against it was made out on the grounds that such an approach unnecessarily kept us on the back foot and on the defensive and made it axiomatic that we would have to face the consequences of a first strike before being able to respond. Moreover, it prevented us from keeping a potential adversary off balance. This view did not, however, prevail in the subsequent discussions in the matter.

What is new about the increased opposition to the NFU posture is that it arises in part from increasing evidence of Pakistan's proclivity to use tactical nuclear weapons against us, and in part from scepticism about our deterrent capability and about our willingness to respond to a tactical strike with a "massive" retaliatory attack. Advocates of a change in our NFU policy would like our nuclear doctrine mimic those of most of the established Nuclear Weapon States which contemplate the use of nuclear weapons even in sub nuclear conflicts.

Since an important element behind the call for revisiting our nuclear doctrine emanates from a lack of confidence in our deterrent and in our willingness to resort to the use of nuclear weapons in a massive second strike in response to an attack on us with tactical weapons the same needs to be addressed by much more effective signaling and a demonstration that the government will do what it says and will not shy from making a robust response when necessary. The following could be some moves in this direction:

1. Government must restore faith in itself by doing what it says and not shying from biting the bullet. Firmness must be shown in all its actions, for instance, on issues of law and order, terrorism and addressing difficult neighbours.
2. Periodic statements about the nurturing and upgradation of our nuclear arsenal and systems including alternate command structure.
3. An indication that our nuclear arsenal will be large enough to take care of all adversaries and will have to be in the mid triple digits.
4. Appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff and upgradation of the NTRO as a capable apex techint organization which would in a fool proof manner provide indicators of any attack on us and ensure swift and massive nuclear retaliation inflicting unacceptable damage.
5. An indication that we have in place multiple, well camouflaged and well secured vectors which are constantly being further refined in order to enable the country to inflict unacceptable damage even after absorbing a first strike by its adversaries

Factors militating against revisiting our nuclear doctrine:

There are many factors which militate against revisiting our nuclear doctrine and sacrificing the restraint it encapsulates by for instance abandoning NFU some of which are enumerated below:

1. All the gains enjoyed by us in the international community by the restraint of our nuclear posture would be frittered away. These do not merely constitute intangibles but entailed the termination of sanctions, support for our entry into the multilateral nuclear export control regimes as well as our civil nuclear cooperation agreements.

2. It would enormously complicate and increase the expenditure incurred by us in regard to our command and control mechanisms which would have to be reconfigured to engage in calibrated nuclear war fighting.
3. It would weaken the possibility of our engaging in conventional warfare insulated from the nuclear overhang.
4. It would encourage the use of tactical nuclear weapons against us under the illusion of no massive response.
5. It would facilitate the painting of South Asia as a nuclear flashpoint and thereby encourage foreign meddling.