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Is India's Nuclear Doctrine Credible?

*Zorawar Daulet Singh**

Recent debates by former officials and analysts on India's nuclear doctrine highlight certain credibility problems. Two inter-related pillars of the doctrine—the pledge of 'No-First Use' (NFU) and the assurance of a 'massive retaliation' response to a nuclear strike—have been scrutinised.¹ The backdrop shaping the debate is the pressing need to discover options to produce a de-escalation or deter an escalation in Pakistan's sub-conventional war. This is the context for the ongoing contestations around India's nuclear doctrine. Is the doctrine lagging the security challenges confronted by India today? Is there is a credibility problem with the doctrine?

A nuclear doctrine typically emerges from perceptions of the geopolitical environment and envisaged threats, and, the composition of the military balance of power confronted by a state. India's strategic planners have made certain conscious choices—based on both Cold War lessons from the US-Soviet nuclear dynamic, and domestic and regional conditions—that have defined and contextualised the role of nuclear weaponry. Because of a combination of three factors—a dominant strategic culture that is uncomfortable with active defence, a civil-military culture that fears a potential militarisation of the state's national security apparatus, and a geopolitical environment where non-nuclear capabilities have been deemed adequate for core defense requirements (that is, safeguarding territorial integrity, and, state and

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national survival)—an assured retaliatory posture, and, its expression in the nuclear doctrine as an unqualified NFU has been deemed as a stable and appropriate response to the nuclearisation of the region.

WHY REVIEW THE DOCTRINE?

Have the nature of threats or the security environment or the composition of military balance changed to prompt a review of the doctrine? Indian perceptions of the security environment have changed. This is partly driven by a diminishing domestic appetite for cross-border terrorism, and partly by the changing composition of capabilities in the overall sub-regional military balance. Pakistan has indicated an overall military doctrine aimed at ‘full-spectrum deterrence’. As General Khalid Kidwai, a former member of Pakistan’s National Command Authority—the apex body that oversees the command and control of the country’s nuclear arsenal—has publicly stated,

Pakistan’s nuclear weapons are ‘not seen as separate weapons. They reinforce the deterrence...Nuclear strategy integrates the land operations of the conventional forces, and of the, at a point in time when the nuclear forces might also come into play. So it is one integrated whole.’²

Kidwai also goes on to dismiss India’s massive retaliation posture as ‘very unrealistic’ and one that has ‘not been thought through’.³

When the entire spectrum of violence is examined, there are two so-called gaps that are said to exist from an Indian perspective: the absence of a proportional and counter-poise capability to Pakistan’s sub-conventional capacity, and, an ambiguous posture to confront Pakistan’s signaled intermingling of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) with its conventional forces.⁴ The principal problem, therefore, confronted by an Indian policymaker and strategist is that given these two gaps in the overall spectrum of envisaged violence, how can India pursue its deterrence tasks? Specifically, the question being asked is whether the Indian nuclear doctrine and deterrent is credible against all categories of nuclear weapons, and, whether it is consistent with India’s conventional war-fighting plans. This is a legitimate question and needs a thoughtful response by the establishment.

Let’s begin with the classic and widely shared interpretation of the doctrine as expounded by former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran:

[T]he label on the weapon, tactical or strategic, is irrelevant since the use of either would constitute a nuclear attack against India. In terms of India's stated nuclear doctrine, this would invite a massive retaliatory strike. For Pakistan to think that a counter-force nuclear strike against military targets would enable it to escape a counter-value strike against its cities and population centres, is a dangerous illusion.⁵

This declared stance affirming a uni-dimensional retaliatory response is precisely why the credibility of the deterrence posture has been critiqued. Would India really respond to a loss of several dozen tanks of one of its 'Strike Corps' by destroying Lahore, and thus inviting a counter-value strike on its own urban centres? By promising to engage in reprisals at the highest level of the spectrum of violence to any type of nuclear use, India's doctrine can be perceived as lacking credibility because it appears to defy the logic of proportionality.⁶ It is instructive that former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon found this credibility issue important enough that he has addressed it in his recent book. He notes:

There is nothing in the present doctrine that prevents India from responding proportionately to a nuclear attack, from choosing a mix of military and civilian targets for its nuclear weapons. The doctrine speaks of punitive retaliation. The scope and scale of retaliation are in the hands of the political leadership...with its NFU doctrine, India has reserved the right to choose how much, where, and when to retaliate.⁷

Now let us revisit the following statement in the 2003 doctrine: 'nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory *or on Indian forces anywhere*.' Was this aspect of the 2003 doctrine intended to signal that India's conventional strike forces can rely upon a nuclear shield if necessary in a contingency? Both Saran and Menon are interpreting the same doctrine, and yet we can notice two very different signals: one of assured massive retaliation, and one of a flexible or calibrated response. Can we reconcile this dichotomy?

I find Balachandran's 2014 commentary on this issue useful because it does seek to address the dualism or contradiction of a 'massive retaliation' declaration with the parallel need to also signal proportionality to confront a 'TNW use' scenario. The 'massive retaliation' reference in the 2003 doctrine⁸, Balachandran argues, is consistent with a second-strike

capability and NFU posture. In the scenario of a first-strike counter-force assault aimed to ‘destroy’ India’s ‘retaliatory (second-strike) capability’, the ‘Indian nuclear doctrine, not surprisingly, requires the Indian response to a first strike to be massive and unacceptable.’⁹ But Balachandran then goes on to note:

However, use of TNWs by Pakistan against Indian troops in Pakistan cannot under any circumstance be considered as anywhere being a first strike. It will have no effect on India’s second-strike capabilities. Therefore, India’s current nuclear doctrine does not call for an automatic massive retaliation for Pakistan’s use of TNWs against Indian troops on Pakistan soil.

However, this does not mean that such an attack will go unanswered. The doctrine does state in unambiguous terms that ‘nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian Territory or on Indian forces anywhere.’ It does not define the level of such retaliation; only that a nuclear attack, which is not a first-strike, will be met with nuclear retaliation.¹⁰

This appears similar to Menon’s recent, and perhaps more authoritative, interpretation of the doctrine where a certain flexibility and discrimination between different types of nuclear weaponry is implicitly acknowledged. In addition, let’s note the following statements from the 1999 Draft Nuclear Doctrine:¹¹

Objectives: The fundamental purpose of Indian nuclear weapons is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons by any State 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.

Credibility: Any adversary must know that India can and will retaliate with sufficient nuclear weapons to inflict destruction and punishment that the aggressor will find unacceptable if nuclear weapons are used against India and its forces.

When the 1999 and 2003 documents are read together, the idea of proportionality is clearly apparent, and thus, by inference, implicit distinctions are recognised between counter-value and counter-force weapons, and, between a response to a homeland first-strike versus a response to a battlefield nuclear strike on India’s conventional land forces. But a perceived flexibility in the existing doctrine by interpretations by former Indian officials and analysts is not enough because after all the aim is to influence the calculus of external actors. For example,

authoritative Pakistani officials such as General Khalid Kidwai interpret the doctrine as most Indians do: as a blanket *massive retaliation* posture with no discrimination towards TNWs. As alluded to earlier, Kidwai has expressed doubts about the efficacy of India's uni-dimensional posture.¹²

Thus, India does need to debate the modes of signaling and whether explicitly clarifying Indian responses to a TNW attack is necessary given the contextual setting of the larger policy problem that is driving the debate, that is, dealing with Pakistan's sub-conventional coercion. Assuming the goal is to make Pakistan think several times before launching a major proxy-terror strike, mitigating the ambiguity around expected Indian responses in post-crisis war-fighting scenarios by careful signaling vis-à-vis the nuances of different types of nuclear exchanges might contribute to the overall aim of changing Pakistan's calculus.¹³ In this sense, the Indian frustration regarding the so-called one-step escalation dynamic—from absorbing a terror strike to an all out South Asian nuclear exchange—might also be the consequence of India's inability to creatively respond to the doctrinal and capability changes on the other side. This is surprising because the basic framework might already exist in the 1999 and 2003 declarations.

COULD THERE BE ANY ADDITIONAL REASONS FOR REVISING THE DOCTRINE?

Two typical rationales for not declaring an NFU or explicitly declaring a first-use posture are: providing credibility to extended deterrence, and, counteracting the potential for coercion at the non-nuclear level. Insofar as the first driver is concerned, India does not extend its nuclear umbrella over another state or group of states. These weapons are purely for territorial and sub-continental security: to stave off nuclear coercion against India and its military forces. The second potential driver—a threat of conventional coercion—is not for the moment considered a serious possibility in the hierarchy of envisaged military threats.¹⁴ It has been argued that why should India give its adversaries the unilateral assurance of an NFU, including an adversary (China) who is conventionally stronger on the hypothesised battlefield? In other words, was NFU conceptualised from a Pakistan-centric standpoint?

So far, however, we have not seen robust arguments based on historical experience or empirical evidence for amending the NFU declaration in the doctrine to confront such scenarios of a conventional asymmetry. The

Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the India-China border has remained stable, with both sides demonstrating strategic and tactical restraint in how they manage border security and preserve their respective claims to disputed areas. However, a radical shift in the Sino-Pakistani military relationship and indications of an operational military alliance, which formally obliged China to underwrite Pakistan's security, should prompt a review of India's doctrine and nuclear force structure. But we are not there yet, and Indian statecraft, one would hope, would endeavour to prevent such a dramatic geopolitical development from occurring in the coming years.

For the moment, finding ways to produce deterrence regarding Pakistan's sub-conventional war is the core priority. The potential introduction of an operational battlefield nuclear shield by the Pakistan Army cannot but have an impact on India's security strategies and military doctrines, especially given that India does plan for contingencies involving conventional cross-border offensives.¹⁵ There is certainly a psychological asymmetry that might already exist in Pakistan's favour and this needs to be addressed. Emphasising the principle of proportionality will address the core credibility problem with the doctrine and restore the perceived battlefield picture to one of *mutual nuclear vulnerability*, the sine qua non of deterrence. The precise forms of signaling—whether it should occur by emphasising or de-emphasising specific aspects of existing accumulated declarations or by releasing an updated version of the nuclear doctrine—should be the key question before policymakers at the apex. India's public nuclear debate too should shift towards examining how the logic of proportionality can be communicated and signaled to external actors.

Having said this, policymakers must also ask themselves another fundamental question: are we seeking to find doctrinal solutions to deter a sub-conventional war at a different and higher level of the spectrum of violence than the domain that needs to be squarely confronted? If indeed, retaining the option and capacity to blunt the so-called advantages of Pakistan's TNWs is part of a larger deterrence strategy against cross-border terrorism, then we must also debate doctrinal and military modernisation at the non-nuclear levels: specifically at the lowest rungs of the conventional and non-conventional spectrums of violence. Ultimately, if confronting Pakistani revisionism and sub-conventional offensives is the overarching security challenge then nuclear signaling would, by itself, contribute only partially to the overall problem. It needs

to be accompanied with, or preceded by, substantial reforms at the lowest levels of the spectrum of violence.

Note

The commentary is based on the author's remarks at a session titled, 'Credible Deterrence through Effective Communication', *India's Nuclear Deterrence: Examination & Analysis*, Seminar organised by the Centre for Air Power Studies, Air Force Auditorium, New Delhi, 2 December 2016.

NOTES

1. Toby Dalton and George Perkovich, 'India's Unresolvable Nuclear Debate', *The Wire*, 1 June 2016; Gurmeet Kanwal, 'Don't Nuke the Debate', *Indian Express*, 16 November 2016; Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'India's Nuclear Doctrine Debate', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 June 2016; Raja Menon, 'Boxed in by Pakistan', *Indian Express*, 6 September 2014; P.R. Chari, 'India's Nuclear Doctrine: Stirrings of Change', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 June 2014; Gurmeet Kanwal, 'India's Nuclear Doctrine: Reviewing NFU and Massive Retaliation', Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 7 January 2015; Manoj Joshi, 'Weighing the Benefits of Recalibrating India's Nuclear Doctrine', *The Wire*, 14 November 2016; Raja Menon, 'A Mismatch of Nuclear Doctrines', *The Hindu*, 22 January 2014.
2. 'A Conversation with General Khalid Kidwai', Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference 2015, held on 23 March 2015. The transcript is available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-230315carnegieKIDWAI.pdf>, accessed on 18 November, 2016.
3. Ibid.
4. The 'Nasr challenge has become a primary prism through which much of the Indian debates on the nuclear doctrinal and force structuring requirements for establishing deterrence in the 21st century are being conducted.' See Frank O'Donnell, 'Reconsidering Minimum Deterrence in South Asia: Indian Responses to Pakistan's Tactical Nuclear Weapons', *Contemporary Security Policy*, October 2016, p. 2.
5. Shyam Saran, 'Dealing with Pakistan's Brinkmanship', *The Hindu*, 7 December 2012. Also see Shyam Saran, 'Is India's Nuclear Deterrent Credible?', Speech at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, 24 April 2013.
6. Again, note General Kidwai's remarks on India's doctrine: '[T]here is the other side which is talking of massive retaliation in response to an all tactical nuclear weapon, I think it has not been thought through. Because they are not taking into account the balance of nuclear weapons of Pakistan,

- which...has the potential to go back and give the same kind of dose to the other side.' See 'A conversation with General Khalid Kidwai', n. 2.
7. Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy*, New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2016, p. 165.
 8. 'Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage', *Nuclear Doctrine, January 2003*, available at <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/lreleng/lyr2003/rjan2003/04012003/r040120033.html>, accessed on 18 November 2016.
 9. G. Balachandran and Kapil Patil, 'Revisiting India's Nuclear Doctrine', *IDS Comment*, 20 June 2014.
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine, 17 August 1999, available at <http://mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?18916/Draft+Report+of+National+Security+Advisory+Board+on+Indian+Nuclear+Doctrine>, accessed on 18 November 2016.
 12. 'A conversation with General Khalid Kidwai', n. 2.
 13. Also see Evan Braden Montgomery and Eric S. Edelman, 'Rethinking Stability in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and the Competition for Escalation Dominance', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, Nos. 1–2, 2015; Ali Ahmed, 'The Interface of Strategic and War Fighting Doctrines in the India-Pakistan Context', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 33, No. 5, 2009.
 14. As a former National Security Advisor notes: 'Unlike in other NWS (nuclear weapon states), India's nuclear weapons are not meant to redress a military balance, or to compensate for some perceived inferiority in conventional military terms, or to serve some tactical or operational military need on the battlefield.' These weapons are primarily to prevent 'nuclear blackmail and coercion against India.' See Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*, n. 7, p. 159.
 15. Alternatively, as Perkovich notes, 'If Indian leaders do not actually intend to put army boots on Pakistani soil, then nuclear escalation is unlikely and India's nuclear doctrine need not be concerned with Pakistan's battlefield nuclear weapons.' See Dalton and Perkovich, 'India's Unresolvable Nuclear Debate', n. 1.