



Reassessing India's no first use doctrine in a changing strategic environment

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Abstract

India's nuclear tests under Operation Shakti (Pokhran-II), conducted between 11 and 13 May 1998, formally established the country as a nuclear-weapons state. This step built upon the earlier peaceful nuclear explosion known as Smiling Buddha (Pokhran-I) of 18 May 1974 and reflected a calculated strategic choice driven largely by security concerns involving China and Pakistan. India achieved this capability without acceding to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The tests paved the way for the official articulation of India's No First Use (NFU) doctrine on 4 January 2003 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2003). In the wake of the Indian Defence Minister's some remarks on indicating that a review of the NFU doctrine could be considered, this article examines whether such a reassessment is necessary. It analyses the original rationale for NFU, the credibility of the commitments it entails, the implications of counterforce strategies, the complications introduced by tactical nuclear weapons (especially in the Pakistan context), and the broader problems associated with both first-use and no-first-use postures in India's two-front nuclear environment involving China and Pakistan.

Keywords: Nuclear policy, Pokhran, national security, strategic landscape, disarmament

Introduction

No First Use (NFU) refers to a pledge or a policy by a nuclear power not to use nuclear weapons as a means of warfare, unless first attacked by an adversary using nuclear weapons. The concept can also be applied to chemical or biological warfare. The first aggressive use of a nuclear weapon will be a confession that deterrence has failed and use of nuclear weapons was the only recourse left. It is globally recognized that nuclear war between two nuclear powers would not lead to any meaningful military decision beyond terrible losses to both sides. In these circumstances no-first-use is the most appropriate policy. The first aggressive use of a nuclear weapon will be a confession that deterrence has failed and use of nuclear weapons was the only recourse left. It is globally recognized that nuclear war between two nuclear powers would not lead to any meaningful military decision beyond awful losses to both sides. In these circumstances no-first-use is the most appropriate policy. It is often mistakenly believed that the concept of no first use is China's contribution to international peace and stability. In fact, the no first use formulation goes back to 1925 when the international community concluded a no first use treaty on chemical weapons and toxins in the Geneva Protocol. The protocol evolved into a "No First Use" treaty because this was achieved by state reservations to the effect that the treaty would cease to binding on the State Party should another use such weapons against it^[1]. Though enormous stockpiles of chemical weapons were produced during the Second World War, neither side used them. This was because mutual deterrence continued to operate among the nations that had chemical weapons stockpiles till these were finally delegitimised by the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention. China announced a no first use commitment immediately after its nuclear test in October 1964. In recent years it has diluted this policy by emphasizing that such a declaration does not apply to territories that belong to China. While

Taiwan falls in this category, so does Arunachal Pradesh in India which China still claims as its own territory. Hence, it can be plausibly stated that China could contemplate the use of nuclear weapons during a war over Taiwan or a border conflict with India in Arunachal Pradesh. China has kept pace with modernization of its nuclear weapons even after economic boom and any change of NFU would affect China's overall strategic stability^[2]. But the other side Pakistan adopted the policy of "first use" Two major factors have prompted Islamabad to adopt such a posture as first a strike nuclear is affordable in financial terms and is less cumbersome to build and as first use policy supposes a small nuclear arsenal, it is easier to manage once it is built and its command and control system is less complex^[3]. As Pakistani Analyst states: It is not clear how for Pakistan will have to be pushed to decide on a first nuclear strike and the trouble is that survival is threatened can be interpreted in multiple ways at different stages of crisis or war and Pakistani former Secretary Aga Shahi points out that it is difficult to define when is last from the Pakistani point of view^[4].

After Pokhran II New Delhi stated that it regards nuclear weapons in purely defensive terms. In government first major statement in Parliament, Mr. Vajpayee noted "India, mindful of its international obligation shall not use these weapons to commit aggression or to mount threats against any country; these are weapons of self-defence and to ensure in turn that India is also not subjected to nuclear threats or coercion. He added that India shall not engage in an arms control race. India shall not also subscribe or reinvent the doctrine of the cold war".

The elements of a nuclear doctrine that would best suit India were laid down by general Sunderji in late 1980 when India was close to weaponization. C. Raja Mohan wrote, after Sunderji's death in Feb. 1999:

The intellectual credit for the Indian decision, so quickly after Pokhran II, to adopt the ideas of minimum deterrence

and no first use, goes largely to Genetal Sunderji ^[5]. As India debates its nuclear future, the ideas propounded by the flamboyant soldier scholar remain the principal signposts ^[6]. K. Subrahmanyam had written in 1986: "Today the international system is dominated by nuclear dacoits who are refusing to disarm and there is nothing unethical if India were to secure for itself necessary self-protection capabilities to ward off coercive use of nuclear diplomacy... If India is to make a serious intervention in the disarmament debate and contribute to nuclear disarmament, acquiring nuclear capability is a fee that has to be paid ^[7]." India proposed the no-first use (NFU) pledge in 1994 as a formal arms control measure and it has been reiterated by Indian political leaders many times since. In his statement to Lok Sabha on 27 May 1998 India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee declared that India "does not intend to use these weapons for aggression or for mounting threats against any country; these are weapons of self-defense, to ensure that India is not subjected to nuclear threats or coercion." A week later he told the Indian parliament that India would follow a policy of "minimum deterrence" and "will not be the first to use nuclear weapons." In the same element, in an interview in November 1999, India's foreign minister Jaswant Singh stated that "the principal role of [India's] nuclear weapons is to deter their use by an adversary" and argued that to maintain this "policy of retaliation only," "survivability become critical to ensure credibility." During the Islamabad round of foreign secretary-level talks between India and Pakistan on 15-18 October 1998 New Delhi reportedly offered a pledge of "no nuclear first use" to Islamabad as part of a package to promote confidence building measure between the two countries. Actually, a resolution moved by India in UN General Assembly that sought to ban the use and the great of use of nuclear weapon was not supported by the nuclear weapons states. But nuclear weapons states voted against the resolution in Nov. 1998 ^[8]. No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons enshrined in the Indian Nuclear Doctrine as a first step towards nuclear disarmament.

The many advantages of the policy of NFU, it is more democratic in contrast to the First Use (FU) policy practiced by the US. Under the policy of FU, per force, nuclear weapons have to be placed with the armed forces for instant use. But in NFU, since nuclear weapons are used only for a second strike, the weapons could be held by a different agency other than the armed forces. India is the only country that has made, "Global, verifiable and nondiscriminatory nuclear disarmament" as a national security objective by including it in the nuclear doctrine. India had introduced such a proposal for consideration in the UN Conference on Disarmament in February 2008. A multilateral agreement under UN should bind the nations to a greater extent to follow the spirit of the treaty.

In fact the National Security Board on 2003, India's top panel of national security expert had asked the government to review its no-first-use of nuclear weapons policy in the light of the history of the last four years. It is evident that the Nuclear Posture Review of the USA and the doctrine of preemption considerably influences the drafting of the report ^[9]. The Security Board's final report recommended that India should consider withdrawing from this commitment as other nuclear weapon states have not accepted this policy of the course the concept of NFU has its critics has argued that it degrades the effectiveness of

deterrence. It is decried in the West as non verifiable and declaratory policy which can be reversed without notice. Another argument against the concept is that nuclear weapons are mean to deter not only nuclear wars but also non nuclear ones and no first use not able to accomplish this task. Some also argue that if a country has absolutely certain information that its adversary is about the launch a nuclear attack there is no reason why it should wait to be hit. Under those circumstances the argument runs it should instead launch a pre emptive strike to destroy the adversary can inflict on it. Such thinking is similar top conventional western nuclear doctrine ^[10].

Jasjit Singh, a member of the NSB in 1999 similarly argued that the draft doctrine in adopting a strict policy of no first use doctrine, explicitly ruling out threats to counter biological and chemical weapons:

The doctrine does not adopt the conventional wisdom of other nuclear weapon states. To that extent this is not only in contrast to the acknowledged wisdom of the mains nuclear weapon powers but seeks to chart a new path...Unlike most other nuclear weapon states, India's nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, biological weapons or a generalized formulation of protecting national interest any time anywhwre ^[11].

Although the 2003 doctrine claimed to maintain India's no first use doctrine, this new clause clearly demonstrated that those advocating a strict interpretation of no first use had lost the internal debate. How can one explain the adoption of this important change in India's official nuclear doctrine their rationale reportedly focused directly on perceived need for India to follow in doctrinal footsteps of other nuclear weapon states: "India must consider withdrawing from this (NFU) commitment as the other nuclear weapon states have not accepted this policy ^[12]?" It is highly revealing that for the NSAB the trigger for resumption of nuclear testing was not that China or Pakistan had started to test nuclear weapons the kind of external threat that realists would focus on but rather US resumption of testing. With respect to testing moreover the NSAB recommended according to press reports, that India should "resume testing nuclear devices if the US resumes its own nuclear tests ^[13]. There are critics even in India, the country which has been in the forefront of a campaign to mobilize world opinion in the favor of the idea for example the defence analyst Bharat Karnad Lambasting India's "No first use strike" policy said, "On paper it sound good but in war, there is no such thing as first or second strike, it is just strike ^[14].

But just as there are arguments against, there are strong arguments in favor of the concept of no first use. A survivable retaliatory capability with a no first use commitment on the other hand contributes to stability at least less precarious than under the present concept of nuclear deterrence and reduces the risks of nuclear blackmail and the actual use of nuclear weapons. It demonstrates restraint and communicates confidences in one's power to retaliate. No first use is also the logical strategy for countries which do not want to waste money on building on war fighting capability. The requirement of deterrence is fully met by no first use apart from being ethical and moral. As for the argument that declaratory policies are not likely to fail we need refer to the Geneva Protocol of 1925 which in essence was a no first use treaty in respect of Chemical Weapons as such it said laid the

foundation for the Chemical Weapons Conventions of 1993 banning that category of weapons of mass destruction^[15].

On April 2011 Senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader and former External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh has called on the government to re-examine its doctrine of no-first-use (NFU). The rationale behind his suggestion is the increasing multi-pronged security concerns facing India. The no-first-use policy was formulated by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government in 1998. According to Jaswant Singh, the NFU policy, as it stands today, is old-fashioned and, hence, the Government cannot 'sit in yesterday's policy'. Pakistan has good delivery systems, which were reportedly transferred to it by China and North Korea. And it is rapidly adding to its nuclear inventory, despite being a failing state run by a powerless government, largely controlled by its military establishment, and with very little control over the terrorist groups operating within its territory.

Playing down these apprehensions, External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna has asserted that there will be no revision of the NFU policy by the government. However, merely allaying the concerns expressed by Mr. Singh is not enough, and the issue deserves an analysis.

China's expansionist policies cannot be deterred by revising the NFU. Besides, it would not be prudent to abandon the NFU and send a deliberate signal of provocation to China. This can offset India's declared stand on a minimum credible nuclear policy and project it as an aggressive power. Further, abrogating the NFU policy would signal a first use posture by India, thus reducing the space for conventional warfare below the nuclear threshold. This could also severely decay India's ability to limit Pakistan's offensive tactics and policies at the conventional level.

At present, there is no evidence to suggest that the reported expansion of Pakistan's nuclear stockpile has degraded India's nuclear retaliatory capability. India should therefore retain its no-first-use doctrine. At present, there is no evidence to suggest that the reported expansion of Pakistan's nuclear stockpile has degraded India's nuclear retaliatory capability. India should therefore retain its no-first-use doctrine.

Speculations regarding India's nuclear policy have persisted ever since the country adopted a voluntary moratorium on further nuclear testing. In particular, the BJP's election manifesto for the 16th Lok Sabha elections in 2014 committed the party to an "Independent Strategic Nuclear Programme" and undertook to examine India's nuclear doctrine in detail, with a view to revising and updating it so that it remained relevant to contemporary security challenges. This pledge revived the debate over the continuity or possible modification of India's No First Use (NFU) posture.

In the contemporary strategic landscape of 2026, India's No First Use (NFU) doctrine confronts pressures far removed from the relatively stable nuclear environment of 2003. China's rapid arsenal expansion, Pakistan's first-use orientation and full-spectrum deterrence, the maturation of India's own triad—including operational deployment of a limited number of warheads and continuous SSBN patrols—and the broader erosion of arms-control norms have collectively narrowed the gap between declared posture and operational reality. SIPRI's assessment of twelve operationally deployed Indian warheads underscores this

quiet shift toward greater readiness without constituting an official doctrinal rupture.

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