
Indian Pugwash Society

Panel Discussion Report On “Future of India’s Nuclear Doctrine”

April 25, 2016 at 11.30 AM, IDSA Auditorium

On April 25, 2016, the Indian Pugwash Society held a panel discussion of Future of India’s nuclear doctrine. The panel discussion was moderated by Ambassador Satish Chandra, former Deputy National Security Advisor to Government of India. The panellists included Lt. Gen. B. S. Nagal, Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi and Prof. Rajesh Rajagopalan, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

In his welcome remarks, Shri Jayant Prasad, Convener, Indian Pugwash Society informed the audience that the panel discussion on India’s nuclear doctrine is a sequel to a lecture delivered by Dr Vipin Narang on “Changing Nuclear Doctrines of Great Powers”, earlier this month. He mentioned that India’s nuclear doctrine and its deterrence posture is a subject of discussion at all major events around the world relating to Asia’s nuclear governance, regional security, and strategic stability. The panel discussion will therefore enrich our understanding and answer may important questions on India’s nuclear doctrine.

Initiating the dialogue, Ambassador Satish Chandra noted that the panel discussion on India’s nuclear doctrine is timely in view of the development of tactical nuclear weapons by Pakistan and its declared intent to use them in the battlefield. Taking note of the views calling for changes in India’s nuclear doctrine, he remarked that much thought had gone into the evolution of India’s nuclear doctrine. At least three papers had been developed in this regard. One by the Indian Army, another by the National Security Council Secretariat, and a third which had been specifically commissioned by Shri Brajesh Mishra from the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), under the chairmanship of Late Shri K Subramanyam. The paper submitted by the NSAB was released subsequently and came to be known as India’s draft nuclear doctrine (DND).

Ambassador Satish Chandra highlighted eight key elements of India’s nuclear doctrine released in a press statement by the government on January 04, 2003. They are:

1. Building and maintaining a Credible Minimum Deterrent (CMD);
2. A No-First Use (NFU) posture;

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3. Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be “massive” and designed to inflict “unacceptable damage” and
 4. Nuclear retaliatory attacks will be authorised only by the civilian political leadership through nuclear command authority;
 5. Non use of nuclear weapons against non nuclear weapon states;
 6. India will retain the option of nuclear retaliation to biological or chemical weapon attacks;
 7. Continuance of strict export controls on nuclear and missile related materials and technologies. Participation in FMCT and moratorium on nuclear testing;
 8. Continued commitment to the goal of a nuclear weapon-free world through global, verifiable and non discriminatory nuclear disarmament.

Lt. Gen. B. S. Nagal in his address mentioned that it is worthwhile to look at how nuclear strategies evolved during the Cold War years for the United States and former Soviet Union, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. One of the key drivers, he emphasised, was technology. The strategy of massive retaliation was outlined by John Foster Dulles when aircrafts were the only means of delivery. With the advent of long-range missiles, the strategy changed to Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Then came TNWs and nuclear strategy further evolved into strategies of flexible response. Technology enabled greater management of nuclear weapons in the battlefield. As the capabilities in space and communication increased, the countries adopted countervailing strategies. New technological means in many ways, shaped the strategic responses during the Cold War years. In India’s neighbourhood too many ongoing developments in the strategic arena are essentially driven by the technology, he observed.

He mentioned that at the time of India’s declaration of its nuclear doctrine, the adversaries possessed limited means of means of delivery and small arsenals. Nobody had predicted then what trajectory will be taken in the years to come. The Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) remains a viable option for India. It is a valid choice that India has made since it requires nuclear weapons only for a strategic purpose. India does not have a policy of nuclear war-fighting. Secondly, CMD is dynamic and flexible in nature and allows responding to challenges as they emerge besides taking into account future contingencies. In his opinion, however, the adoption of NFU in India’s nuclear doctrine restricts the country’s choices in terms of strategic responses.

He remarked that India's Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) is stabilising although it is often deemed by Pakistan to be the opposite. He mentioned that in last few decades, China has grown its missile inventory exponentially. China has tested ASAT weapons, demonstrated missile interception capabilities, and acquired hypersonic glide vehicles, all of which raise serious concerns for stability. China has made a quantum jump in technology, including MARVing & MIRVing. China's SSBN fleet continues to grow. It has built deeper silos, increased the mobility and survivability of launchers, and improved the penetrability of the strategic systems.

He noted that Pakistan too has developed a large number of warheads, which is clearly beyond its needs. Pakistan has developed long-range missiles such as SHAHIN-3 and justified it for targeting Andaman & Nicobar Island. SHAHIN-3, incidentally, is also capable of reaching Israel. Further, Pakistan intends to modify its diesel electric submarines to carry nuclear warheads. They have announced TNWs and make no bones about how they will be used. India therefore, will have to contend with very large strategic forces in its neighbourhood. He underscored that TNWs are problematic as it takes command and control down to lower levels and delegated to forward positions in the battlefield.

In view of the ongoing developments in India's neighbourhood, he opined that strategic deterrence and CMD are acceptable and India should continue with it. Due to India's NFU, however, the adversary is at liberty to target country's C4ISR systems before launching a nuclear first strike. Furthermore, China's ASAT capabilities, together with MARV & MIRV, pose threats to India's BMD and interception systems and are capable of destroying country's C4ISR system. Rocket forces of China, which are a mix of convention and strategic missiles, could exhaust Indian capabilities to intercept missiles. The Chinese cyber capabilities pose additional threats of incapacitating the weapon and communication systems.

He suggested, as a consequence, that India needs to re-visit its NFU policy and till the NFU remains; the country needs to improve its defensive capabilities in the forms of anti-ballistic missiles, and the C4ISR systems. He cautioned since NFU did not convince Pakistan about India's defensive nuclear strategy, no policy will convince Islamabad, and there is no need, therefore, for India to take Pakistan's concerns into account.

He concluded by stating that, globally, technology is bringing an unprecedented change in nuclear strategies. The United States is investing in billions of dollars in nuclear weapons' modernisation programmes. Russia is already building a new class of strategic missiles and submarines, China too is on the same path and Pakistan is

unlikely to exercise restraint in the foreseeable future. He, therefore, concluded by calling for revisiting India's nuclear doctrine.

Prof. Rajesh Rajagopalan, in his address, remarked that rapid changes are taking place in nuclear policies of great powers. Russia's dependence on nuclear forces is growing and significant changes may be underway in China's thinking on nuclear doctrine and in its strategic force posture. Although the great powers are not engaged in expanding their arsenals very much, changes are clearly underway in technologies, attitudes, and doctrines that could increase strategic instability and require close monitoring. In this context, he highlighted that a periodic review of India's nuclear doctrine is also necessary. He mentioned that India's existing nuclear doctrine is in the form of a press statement and there is a need for a longer, clearer document spelling out India's doctrine in greater detail. He noted that fifteen years is a rather long period for the nuclear doctrine not to be reviewed but that review does not mean revision.

He suggested that the Indian nuclear doctrine needs clarification on several counts. Nuclear response to CBW strikes, he noted, is a real contradiction to India's No First-Use commitment. The idea of using nuclear weapons against chemical and biological attacks lacks credibility and India is unlikely to follow-up on such a commitment. He, therefore, suggested that the CBW contradiction in India's nuclear doctrine be resolved.

On massive retaliation, he mentioned that it complicates the calculation of adversary contemplating nuclear strikes on India. However, massive retaliation creates problems if Pakistan were to use TNWs on its own territory against an advancing Indian military force. It lacks credibility in that scenario.

He also suggested greater realism about NFU. The NFU policy was adopted primarily because India's strategic circumstances permit the adoption of such a policy. Whether states adopt NFU or not is at least partly dependent on the conventional military balance. The reason why Pakistan has refused to adopt NFU is due to its perceived conventional asymmetry vis-a-vis India. He stated that to consider changes to NFU, India must examine conditions under which its conventional capabilities might be weakened significantly and warrant change to its NFU policy. China's growing military build-up in Tibet, India's inability to militarily hold territories that China claims, and the prospect of a two-front war are the potential dangers that might suggest a change in India's NFU policy.

He opined, however, that even under the conditions of significant growth in Chinese conventional military capabilities in Tibet or increased probability of a two-front war scenario, giving up NFU is not viable or necessary because India does not face existential threats in a conventional war with either Pakistan or China or together. Even the worst case outcome is likely to be only a loss of territory in either Kashmir or

along the China border, neither of which can be avoided or countered with nuclear first use. Neither do Pakistan's TNWs merit changes in India's NFU policy. Although Pakistan attempts to convey that it subscribes to not just nuclear First-Use but also an early-use policy, it is highly unlikely that Pakistan will use nuclear weapons except if there is danger to the survival of Pakistan itself.

He suggested that Indian nuclear doctrine does face some challenges related to command and control arrangements as India moves towards canisterized missiles and deterrent patrols with the Arihant nuclear missile submarine.

Another challenge related to the amount of fissile stocks India has. He pointed out if FMCT negotiations on the treaty were to start, it is not clear if India will be able to sign any treaty that comes out of it because estimates of India's fissile materials stock suggest these are quite low. He concluded by stating that the current challenges require greater discussion both at the public level and within the government on various aspects of country's nuclear doctrine.

The Chair summed up the discussion by stating that India's doctrine was developed mainly around the statements made by Prime Minister Vajpayee shortly after our tests that India's nuclear policy would be non-threatening and defensive in nature. He agreed with the panellists that like with any other policy the nuclear doctrine should also be subject to a periodic review. However, changes to India's NFU policy would involve costs both in diplomatic and financial terms.. In his view, India's nuclear doctrine including its NFU posture was well founded and therefore there was no need for change.

