

India's Nuclear No-First Use: A Policy of Stability

Reshmi Kazi

In May 1998, after conducting five nuclear tests India declared itself a state with nuclear weapons capability. Subsequently, India enunciated its draft nuclear doctrine in August 1999. The draft doctrine was embedded upon the cardinal principles of credible minimum deterrence, nuclear no-first-use policy and a retaliatory capability to inflict unacceptable damage. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government formulated the no-first-use (NFU) policy and formally adopted it in 2003. The principal goal of the NFU policy is to assure a NFU of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states. Premised upon a posture of second-strike capability, the NFU policy professes massive nuclear retaliation “only” against any first strike against India or its forces anywhere with nuclear or any other weapons of mass destruction. The objective of the NFU policy is to convey that India possesses the necessary intention, will and determination to inflict unacceptable damage upon the adversary contemplating any misadventure involving nuclear weapons use against New Delhi. Simultaneously, the NFU policy repudiates any brinkmanship by avoiding the deployment of weapons on hair-trigger alert and keeping an arms race under control. The principal essence of the NFU doctrine is to maintain a policy of restraint as envisaged in the nuclear doctrine while projecting a posture of massive retaliation to deter any adversarial designs against India's national interests.

Given the strategic benefits of the NFU policy; is there a need to revise the NFU policy, which has been accepted by successive governments since its inception and has served the strategic interests of India for over a decade? In March 2011, India's former foreign minister Mr Jaswant Singh, cited reasons of security concerns emanating from China and Pakistan as primary purposes for re-examining the NFU policy. China's expansionist policies and rising ambitions posed significant threats to India's interests in the future. Pakistan's increasing nuclear inventory (100 to 110 nuclear warheads as suggested by international experts) reinforced with technologically advanced delivery systems were viewed with apprehension within Indian strategic quarters. Singh had also reasoned that a neighboring Pakistan with a fragile political system primarily under the military establishment and poor control over terrorist groups operating on its soil posed worries for India.

In addition to the above concerns, the skeptics have questioned the usefulness of the NFU policy on the ground that it does not constitute an effective strategic mechanism against Pakistan. The NFU policy is predominantly assumed to be a merely declaratory policy and that it lacks any binding legitimacy. Further, Pakistan's NASR tactical nuclear missile with “rapid deployment and effective use of shoot-and-scoot tactics” has raised concerns amongst Indian strategists over Pakistan's intentions. Several Indian experts opine that Pakistan's aim is to corrode India's posture of massive retaliation in case of a limited nuclear attack on Indian forces within Pakistani territory. Adhering to a similar viewpoint, Pakistan reflects upon the NFU doctrine with equal skepticism. Both the political and military establishments in Pakistan, considers India's NFU posture as a “paper policy” incapable of enduring escalatory situations. Pakistan criticizes the NFU doctrine as a “unilateral decision”, which can be withdrawn in an adverse situation. Pakistan firmly believes that in battlefield situations bearing high risks of escalation, the NFU policy will discard all restraint and transforms into a first-use posture.

The NFU policy has been further criticized on the ground that it applies to only non-nuclear weapon states and hence it lacks universality. This is an erroneous interpretation. There has been no official declaration to suggest that India's NFU policy is formulated only for a subset of states (non-nuclear weapons states) as against nuclear weapon states. India has not officially withdrawn its NFU posture against nuclear capable states. India extends a negative security assurance of non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states unconditionally. Towards nuclear weapons states, India will refrain from a first-use nuclear war-fighting strategy as long as no adversary initiates any nuclear misadventure against India. Hence, there exists no declared discrimination between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states in the 2003 official nuclear doctrine of India. This stand has been evident in the former Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao's address at the 3rd MEA-IISS Seminar in February 2010.¹ This position has been reiterated² and conveyed to the international community from time to time. In fact, as recent as April 2014 former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh upheld India's commitment to a NFU policy.³ These discourses uphold the formulation that "India has a NFU policy" implying that there has been no dilution in its official stance.

Would a proposed revision of the NFU policy provide major strategic benefits? A proposed NFU revision in the context of "challenges of current time" needs an appraisal. Any modification of the existing NFU doctrine into a first-use will not serve to deter China. On the contrary, any such revision would be immediately interpreting India as a nuclear war-mongering nation posing serious ramifications for India's national security. India is a status quo power and its strategic culture relents any war-fighting strategy. Besides, India's external security environment has not undergone any dramatic change for the government to reassess the NFU policy. Cross-border terrorism still subsists, as before while Pakistan continues expanding its nuclear inventory. Arguably, India's own nuclear arsenal is expected to increase with the consistent developments in its breeder technology that will produce significant reactor-grade plutonium. Hence, any hypothetical calculations of Pakistan's expanding nuclear warheads should not be a determining factor to propose a reassessment of the NFU policy.

The credibility of the NFU policy is questioned on the ground of its efficacy especially when an adversary is preparing for a nuclear strike. However, mere preparation for a nuclear strike is not equivalent to a nuclear attack. In fact it can be a strategic move of "coercive diplomacy" by the adversary.⁴ It is a safeguard against any immediate retaliation while conveying that retaliation is assured and punitive. No nuclear weapons war-fighting strategy cannot provide lasting peace to India or its adversaries. Contrarily, to validate the argument, the NFU policy seeks to promote strategic restraint and crisis stability.

Reshmi Kazi is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

¹ Address by Foreign Secretary at the 3rd MEA-IISS Seminar on "Perspectives on Foreign Policy for a 21st Century India," *Ministry of External Affairs*, February 22, 2010 at <http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/1171/Address+by+Foreign+Secretary+at+the+3rd+MEAIISS+Seminar+on+Perspectives+on+Foreign+Policy+for+a+21st+Century+India> (Accessed on June 10, 2014).

² Address by Foreign Secretary at Harvard on 'India's Global Role,' *Ministry of External Affairs*, September 20, 2010 at <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/741/> (Accessed on June 10, 2014).

³ Inaugural Address by Dr Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India on "A Nuclear Weapon-Free World: From Conception to Reality," *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, April 2, 2014 at <http://idsa.in/keyspeeches/InauguralAddressShriManmohanSingh> (Accessed on June 10, 2014).

⁴ Manpreet Sethi, *Nuclear Strategy: India's March towards Credible Deterrence* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2009), p. 135.