

Beyond Current Nuclear Doctrine Debates: Addressing India's Two-Front Challenge

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ABSTRACT There are two streams of debate on India's current nuclear doctrine: one on its current interpretation and deducing its form and what such form means for India's overall nuclear strategy; and another, more internal to India, on what should be the Indian nuclear doctrine with respect to the evolving nature of threats. The two debates are not mutually exclusive. However, neither of them have contended with all conventional contingencies, in particular the two-front scenario or collusive threat. This brief problematises the collusive threat contingency with an overview of these debates to expound on the fundamental character and objective of the Indian nuclear doctrine. It explains the doctrine's silence on the puzzle of two-front scenario along with India's conventional inadequacies and prescribes an alternate formulation that bifurcates the country's nuclear doctrine.

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INTRODUCTION

Doctrines are a function of threats, capabilities and war objectives.¹ Indian nuclear strategy accounts for a complicated threat spectrum that includes two formidable rivals in Pakistan and China with whom it has long running territorial disputes. The latter is superior to India in both conventional and nuclear capabilities, while the former has adopted a 'first-use' nuclear doctrine with ambiguous red lines and a counter-escalatory conventional doctrine based on "quid-pro-quo-plus" in support of low-intensity proxy warfare. India has a singular doctrine to cater for the entire nuclear-conventional threat spectrum.

India's official nuclear doctrine, released by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in 2003, states a posture of "No First Use" and in case of a first-strike (use) promises retaliation that is "massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage".² They flow from the view held by the majority in the Indian strategic affairs community, that nuclear weapons have a political value in ensuring the survivability of the state and deterring existential threats, rather than for any military effect or utility in the battlefield. This sets the doctrinal objective of avoiding a mutually damaging nuclear war, and second, it appreciates the special nature of nuclear weapons and the circumstances of their use. To that end, the NFU and the massive formulation together seek to deter conventional hostilities from taking a nuclear turn whether through 'first use' or 'first strike'.

DEBATES ON DOCTRINE

Both of these elements have been the subject of much analysis from scholars and experts. The fact that the "massive" formulation was introduced as a change from the previous "punitive" formulation in the draft nuclear doctrine in 1999,³ proved that India wanted to preclude the option of nuclear use amongst its adversaries.⁴ This was also in line with India's objective of relying on its conventional capability to operationalise a deterrence by punishment strategy. This has been a particularly preferred option against Pakistan. However, Pakistan's first-use doctrine and incorporation of tactical nuclear weapons in its force posture has led analysts to call for substitution of the "massive retaliation" concept with a more "graduated" or "flexible" retaliation.⁵ This goes against the grain in the current nuclear doctrine because unlike the "massive" formulation, flexible response is more permissive of first use by the adversary.⁶ It is, however, noteworthy that "massive"—despite being a clear break from "punitive"—is neither qualified nor quantified.⁷ There is also no clear hint of a proportionate or disproportionate response.⁸ Moreover, this formulation affords both counter-value and counter-force options as may be necessary in a retaliation.⁹ Further, graduated retaliation would place enormous pressure on India's nuclear command and control systems.¹⁰

A second debate has revolved around India's commitment to the NFU in a crisis situation. In 2018, Christopher Clary and

Vipin Narang in an article^a wrote about India's "counter-force temptations" where they highlighted India's growing unease with the NFU pledge. Clary and Narang argued that India's current nuclear doctrine is flexible enough to allow for a "first strike" and a counterforce strategy (first strike or second strike) based on the logic of damage limitation.¹¹ As evidence, they quoted statements from former and current officials of the government, and pointed to India's modernisation of the country's nuclear arsenal.¹² In another piece, Kumar Sundaram and MV Ramana have noted that India's nuclear doctrine may not be a reliable predictor of how India might behave in a crisis.¹³ While the NFU may serve India's interest in peacetime, it will make no sense to absorb the full impact of a potential first nuclear strike or use, particularly when such use is imminent.¹⁴ For instance, former National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, though categorical about the retaliatory nature of the strike, has also indicated in his writings that India will have no incentive to limit its response once the conflict had moved into the nuclear realm, to allow a second iteration of nuclear response from Pakistan.¹⁵

This author has written earlier that this incentive of damage limitation during a crisis when nuclear use is imminent, could shift the calculus in India's decision-making to the point that pre-emptive counterforce

first-strike becomes a rational choice to avoid the damage inflicted by first use.¹⁶ This is a more desirable option when the foremost objective of India's nuclear doctrine to keep the conflict from going nuclear is not met.¹⁷ Other scholars like Rajesh Rajagopalan and Manpreet Sethi have consistently argued that such a change has not actualised, and they cite another set of statements that affirm NFU and argue that a 'first-use' posture would require a different set of capabilities that will put India on an arms race trajectory.¹⁸ Shyam Saran writes, "Infrastructure required for a first use or flexible response doctrine would be very different from what we have so far invested in, and would require different command and control mechanisms".¹⁹ Though both Clary and Narang, and Sundaraman and Ramana bring out the increase in capacity in terms of improvements in ISR related capabilities and an increase in canisterisation²⁰ implying higher readiness of use, only a part of the nuclear arsenal is at a higher level of readiness. Rajagopalan has counter-argued that the arsenal size required for taking out all of Pakistan's long-range delivery systems would be considerably greater than India currently has or could potentially muster, apart from the need of residual capability against another nuclear adversary—China.²¹ In fact, all nuclear weapon states keep a part of their strategic forces in a ready state, to enhance their retaliatory capabilities and as a measure of reasonable precaution.²²

a Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang. "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities." *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2019): 7-52

In addition, given India's "Cold Start" operational concept and a doctrine of "proactive strategy",²³ its reliance on superior conventional forces and a widening capability gap with Pakistan, imply that keeping the war from going nuclear is not only a declaratory doctrinal objective but also an operational imperative, notwithstanding the inherent complexities of the conventional-nuclear interface.²⁴ Even on the China front, latest studies show that India in fact maintains a conventional edge in terms of mobilisations timelines and ability to concentrate air power due to forward deployment and geographic advantages.²⁵ This has allowed India to move from a conventional stance of deterrence by denial, to punishment.²⁶

These debates reveal a fundamental and living logic to the doctrine. Whether the doctrinal objective of avoiding nuclear first use or the incentive for damage-limitation dominates during a crisis, the declaratory doctrine and operational postures, though separate, seamlessly tie into an overall nuclear strategy of deterring nuclear first-use by keeping the adversary from resorting to its nuclear stockpile, whether tactical or strategic. India's gradual move from NFU to an *NFU with ambiguity*, captured in the current defence minister's cryptic tweet,²⁷ is not a break from its past; rather, it adheres to the goal of defeating nuclear first use. Preservation of this character of the declaratory doctrine is therefore a fundamental tenet that informs India's nuclear doctrine objective and overall nuclear strategy.

COLLUSIVE THREAT AND THE SILENCE OF INDIAN NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

A third scenario has existed as a nuclear contingency, in the realm of conventional war-fighting spectrum. This view has been held, for example, by Air Commander Jasjit Singh,²⁸ who argued in 2003 that India "must objectively assess what would be the scenarios where India would need to use nuclear weapons first, warranting a first-use strategy and its attendant costs?" He went on to define two such contingencies—one "a significant military setback, if not a decisive military defeat," and second, a "surprise breakthrough by the enemy with conventional forces." The current Indian nuclear doctrine posits the NFU formulation for all cases including conventional contingencies, where it is water-tight on its wording with no ambiguity over the NFU holding up in a conventional battle.

India's current doctrine aims to leverage conventional capability gap against Pakistan. This is not the case with China which has superiority in military infrastructure, technology and equipment over a long-running territorial dispute along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), but India maintains a strong local conventional posture along the LAC to blunt these advantages, if not to completely negate them. As both countries have a declared NFU with reasonable second-strike capability, India will not derive much value out of nuclear first use and would rather invest in conventional forces to instrumentalise conventional deterrence.

However, India's threat spectrum is not limited to conventional contingencies focused on just one adversarial actor. Indeed, it is complicated by the feasibility of a collusive threat that two adversarial neighbours could jointly present.

The China-Pakistan relationship is underpinned by a genuinely strong strategic rationale that includes co-production and joint development of defence technology and products. Earlier, China had transferred nuclear weapons designs to Pakistan in contravention of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and was instrumental in propping up a nuclear-armed state along India's borders to the detriment of India's conventional capability advantages.²⁹ Since then, Pakistan has been one of the largest recipients of weapons from China, and this includes high-end systems like fighter aircraft JF-17 Block-3, submarines (Type-041/Yuan), anti-ship missiles, torpedoes, tanks, and frigates.³⁰

China's steadfast support for Pakistan's actions has reached the extent of undercutting India's gains beyond the call of defending Pakistan's interests. This includes, for instance, stonewalling sanctions against known Pakistan-based militants, and rejecting India's membership to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).³¹ Overall, the nature of this support evokes a strong adversarial confluence against India.

Strategic cooperation in itself may not be enough to argue that a two-front attack could materialise. However, if one looks at

the trajectory of conflicts closely and the incentives such crises could present in the future, a collusive threat seems probable.

China for instance in the previous India-Pakistan crises, has been portrayed as responsible for playing neutral. Its role is, however, more complicated than that. Though China did not actively participate for instance in the 1965, 1971 or 1999 wars/conflicts against India, it was certainly involved. In 1965, China threatened to intervene with a three-day ultimatum on behalf of Pakistan, if Pakistan leaders had requested such an intervention and would not leave China in lurch.³² In 1971, China refused to intervene militarily despite being encouraged by the US to do so. This was attributed to its lack of control over dominant positions along the LAC.³³ Both in 1965 and 1971, China's diplomatic support was strongly on Pakistan's side. This notion of 'neutrality' gave way to military opportunism in the 1999 Kargil conflict. At the time when India pulled out troops from the LAC to counter Pakistan's incursion along the LoC, China took advantage of the weaknesses in India's on-the-ground presence to build a five-km track along the Pangong Tso lake to step up patrolling.³⁴

In recent years, the transfer of military equipment between China and Pakistan has also resulted in military interoperability between the two states. This has been supplemented and complemented with various joint military exercises, with some of them being held fairly close to the territory administered by India.³⁵

Finally, China's investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that passes through disputed territory in Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, ensures that China and Pakistan are tied in defending a mutual security interest both in soldiers and material.³⁶ In any future Indian offensive action across the Line of Control (LoC), China's human and material interests are likely to provoke Chinese actions in defense of those interests to make it party to India-Pakistan conflict. Some visible signs of Chinese interests in the issue have already emerged, first when China vociferously came out against India's abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A of the Constitution and absorb Ladakh as a Union Territory (UT), calling it as "unacceptable"; it even raised the issue at the UN Security Council.³⁷ Latest incursions along the LAC in May 2020 by China also reinforce the stakes it has in supporting Pakistan's claims on Kashmir.³⁸ It was also reported that Pakistan deliberately made some troop movements in Gilgit-Baltistan region around the same time to force India into submission.³⁹

Apart from stakes and interests, as Kargil 1999 has shown, conflict situations can also incentivise opportunistic military behaviour. A two-front scenario can therefore transpire if India is in conflict with Pakistan, and China intervenes as it sought to do in 1965. Second, if India is in conflict with China, and Pakistan out of its own volition or at the behest of China opens another front. And third, if both states open fronts against India as part of a joint executed military strategy.

Pakistan, for instance, has joined China's Beidou Satellite System (BDS)⁴⁰ which could be of military utility in a crisis even without China participating overtly. China's strategic support force could intervene in the cyber, space or electronic domains with decisive implications in a military situation. The feasibility of these scenarios will vary on political grounds, whether it is peacetime or one of crisis. Nevertheless, they ensure that the past may not be the prologue, and that a single front could give way to a collusive threat forcing India's defense planning to take the two-front scenario into account.

India's current nuclear doctrine cannot accommodate this scenario because it is watertight in its language on purely conventional contingencies. If a two-front scenario were to materialise today, the Indian nuclear doctrine in its current format cannot provide or communicate the requisite nuclear deterrence or nuclear nature of the confrontation.

A second option for India is to depend on its conventional capacity to respond to such a contingency. However, this would place immense pressure on limited conventional resources. India has only now started moving towards a theater command structure which is yet to take its final form. However, even with the consequent force structure optimisation, the arithmetic of force match-up will not be in India's favour.⁴¹ In addition, India's fighter aircraft squadrons, the mainstay of the conventional deterrent are dwindling in strength. Despite the induction of new variants like the indigenous LCA-Tejas and

the French Rafale, numbers are set to drop to approximately 28 squadrons⁴² against the requisite 42 for a two-front scenario.⁴³

A less than satisfactory and sluggish economic growth over the last couple of years, coupled with a burgeoning military pensions header,⁴⁴ has strained India's conventional capability amidst an overall flattening of defense allocations.⁴⁵ The defence budgets have neither been commensurate to the expansion in the threat spectrum—especially with newer challenges in Indian Ocean Region (IOR), nor sufficient to account for growth in personnel costs over the years. India as a developing state faces a tyrannical trade-off between managing expenditure on social welfare programs, and defence spending.⁴⁶ As a ramification, Indian conventional capability has seen little beyond piecemeal modernisation that has rendered three services namely the Indian Army (IA), Indian Air Force (IAF) and Indian Navy (IN) vying for a limited pie of the capital expenditure budget.⁴⁷ The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this budgetary crisis.⁴⁸ The Ministry of Defense (MoD), as a result, has been forced to limit capital expenditure for the first quarter of the fiscal year to cover payments only for existing contracts, thereby leaving no space for new procurement.⁴⁹

In addition, this may lead to sub-optimal defence planning⁵⁰ of spreading forces thin with less ammunition stocks to spend in case of a single-front contingency. Clearly inviting a two-front conventional contingency armed only with conventional options does not augur well for India.

NEW BOTTLES FOR THE SAME WINE

An alternative path is to amend the Indian nuclear doctrine in such a way that it preserves its fundamental character and objective even as it allows the country to kill the spawning of a two-front conventional scenario at its inception. This brief proposes that India bifurcate its nuclear doctrine with either two congruent versions or two slightly different versions of the same doctrine with minor language and semantic changes.

A bifurcation of the Indian nuclear doctrine would result in a Pakistan-specific text, and another China-specific text. Even if this content were to be congruent, this would leave open an interpretive gap or ambiguity for India to exploit without explicitly downgrading its commitment to NFU in its nuclear doctrine, by way of not accounting for a collusive attack (two-front scenario). This would effectively mean that India's NFU adherence will only be limited to contingencies strictly spelled out in the doctrine, specifically ones involving single-front. The implicit and unstated condition in the doctrine would convey that NFU adherence will not apply to a two-front conventional scenario. To further communicate this to the recipient adversary, government and quasi-government mouthpieces can explicitly mention that the doctrine is only applicable to the single-front contingencies. This would allow for nuclear first-use and effectively introduce nuclear deterrence against any military opportunisms or actual collusive planning to intimidate or stretch India's conventional forces and resources.

Since this declaratory change preserves the fundamental character of the doctrine, it does not put any new pressure on India's nuclear posture. However, it introduces a nuclear dimension at the very onset of a two-front conventional threat. This is based on the same logic that applies to security alliances, where neither alliance partner wishes to follow through on the commitment of presenting a unified threat to the adversary, because there is a chance that the military goal could be realised at their own expense.

This would account for India's lack of two-front conventional capacity and in fact strengthen the country's conventional deterrent in case of single-front contingencies by allowing it to bear the full weight of its conventional forces against the aggressor without worrying about the other front posing a conventional threat. In the process, it will also strengthen India's fundamental objective of not fighting a nuclear war by limiting the conventional threat spectrum to one adversary at a time. This forecloses the probability of a scenario in which India would face rapid degradation of its conventional forces or the conventional line of defence.

Alternatively, India could openly declare in the doctrine that the NFU will not apply to a two-front scenario. However, this may be received negatively internationally and diminish India's responsible nuclear power status. Another alternative could be to continue with the current doctrine and amend it midway through a crisis to signal

intra-war deterrence. However, this may have greater downsides as India could risk losing a significant portion of its conventional forces or an asset of strategic value by the time the nuclear intra-war deterrent can kick in to stop the collusive military action.

PRESERVING CHARACTER WHILE LENDING FLEXIBILITY

One reason India would not want a bifurcation of the doctrine at the declaratory level is that it would have to explicitly identify China as a nuclear rival. Though this may be a known secret, diplomatic and political necessities require language that does not unnecessarily introduce tension in a pre-existing competitive dynamic. This could be skirted around by use of "near peer" and "peer" references for Pakistan and China, respectively. This bifurcation of doctrine will affirm India's declaratory commitment to the NFU and could potentially segregate the standard of "credible minimum" to alleviate or remove the pressure whether real or a made-up *raison d'être* for Pakistan to expand fissile material production and the overall nuclear arsenal.⁵¹ A bifurcated doctrine could have two alternate texts with minimal changes in the language of the original draft:

Original:

2. *India's nuclear doctrine can be summarized as follows:*

1. Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent;

Bifurcated:

2. *India's nuclear doctrine can be summarized as follows:*

1. *Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent against a near-peer nuclear rival;*

And

2. *India's nuclear doctrine can be summarized as follows:*

1. *Building and maintaining a minimum credible deterrent against a peer nuclear rival;*

Options for 'Credible Minimum' versus 'Minimum Credible' Formulation

A bifurcated doctrine could also allow India the option of playing with “credible minimum” formulation where technically two different permutations are possible—credible minimum or minimum credible. At first glance, sequencing may not convey any difference since they literally translate to the same phrase. But that is often not the case with declaratory doctrines where words can be creatively interpreted. India's credible minimum formulation has an inherent tension between “credible” and “minimum”, in that it seeks a nuclear posture that is credible against both its adversaries but chasing the minimum “credible” standard against China contradicts the credible “minimum” standard against Pakistan. This tension in the doctrine is utilised as a fig leaf by actors, both outside the sub-continent

and Pakistan to pressure India into a bilateral arms control arrangement with Pakistan, which could put it in a permanently weaker position vis-à-vis China.

The “minimum credible” formulation has more of an emphasis on the credible side of the equation against a “credible minimum” which has more emphasis on the minimum side of the equation. In a bifurcated doctrine, India, if it wants, could take advantage of the bifurcation to declare a “minimum credible” standard for China while maintaining a “credible minimum” stance against Pakistan. This is segregation of responses towards the different nature of threats but does not imply a segregation of the nuclear posture at the operational level. It is merely a statement of intent, that India does not intend to use its capabilities in excess of the ‘minimum’ against Pakistan. It gives India the advantage that in any future arms control arrangement, it will only deal with Pakistan and China bilaterally and separately.

This is important because it addresses at the declaratory level Pakistan's notion of strategic stability that paints all of India's efforts at modernisation of the nuclear arsenal as destabilising.⁵² Indeed, Pakistan sells its vastly more ambitious nuclear program purposely built for revisionist objectives on a comparatively shoestring gross domestic product as merely a “defensive” action.⁵³ It points to India's arsenal while feigning ignorance of India's heft in the international system, its political, economic stature and most importantly the military necessity of maintaining a credible

deterrent against another nuclear rival with which it has had one major war and numerous border skirmishes. Pakistan as an adversary does not bear responsibility for India's security and seeks to derive maximum mileage to conform to its notion of strategic stability, however destabilising that may be in reality. Obfuscation of reality, however, often sells well in the international arena where the concept of "stability"—no matter how detrimental or flawed—takes precedence over any kind of arms race. Some for instance have suggested trilateral arms control⁵⁴ or trilateral strategic dialogue between Pakistan, India and China.⁵⁵

Any trilateral arrangement is bound to put India at disadvantage because it will tie India to a position where it is at a permanent disadvantage against China even if it maintains a qualitative edge over Pakistan, not to forget the two-front arithmetic. A bifurcated doctrine would in one stroke formally put an end to any mistakenly conceptualised notions of strategic stability or attempts at trilateral arrangements that do not take into account India's threat spectrum. It could establish this by formally declaring the bifurcation of the threat spectrum, thereby ensuring that any future proposals on strategic stability or arms control are essentially bilateral and not trilateral in nature.

CONCLUSION

Analysts have often debated the value of declaratory doctrines given that adversaries gauge nuclear strategy more as a function of the nuclear posture than any declaratory

promises that could come to a naught in a crisis situation. However, in the absence of declaratory doctrines, adversaries are likely to be more prone to guesswork about the conditions of nuclear use. The value of a declaratory doctrine lies in communicating to one's own audience as well as adversaries the near, if not precise, conditions and exigencies when nuclear weapon use could take place. They do so by explicitly stating these conditions of use or implicitly restricting the doctrine to a set of exigencies to which it is applicable, while ensuring sufficient ambiguity in the excluded cases.

Such ambiguity is available for the adversary to infer and comprehend. Given that India has long-running territorial disputes with both China and Pakistan, whose military interests intersect in various ways, and a two-front scenario cannot be ruled out, a bifurcated declaratory doctrine seeks to achieve exact nuclear deterrence sufficient to cater to the entire threat spectrum. It would manipulate the threat spectrum to India's advantage by disallowing the genesis of a collusive threat and improving the availability of conventional resources for single adversary contingencies. This strengthens the conventional deterrent and, in the process, achieves the fundamental Indian nuclear doctrinal objective of not fighting a nuclear war. This is also a necessary change mandated due to constraints in expanding conventional capabilities which are in any case not sufficient for collusive threats. Finally, a bifurcated doctrine could also achieve certain strategic objectives by affording more flexibility at the declaratory level whilst removing the false *raison d'être*

of certain nuclear armed states for bringing nuclear calamity upon India. Whichever way the doctrine debates proceed from here on,

India should not end up fighting a two-front conventional war with only conventional resources. [ORF](#)

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