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Re-examining India's Nuclear Doctrine*

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Introduction

The Indian Government announced its formal nuclear doctrine on 4 January 2003, almost five years after testing its nuclear weapons capability in May 1998. While the one-page document was vague and subject to interpretation, what was clear was that it reiterated India's 'No First Use' policy.

The BJP's election manifesto for the 2014 General Election declared that they would study the nuclear doctrine and, if required, update it. Subsequently, the then prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi clarified that as far as he was concerned, he would go with the No First Use (NFU) policy as articulated by former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It evoked an interest in the subject as there have been numerous developments in the region since 2003 which pose challenges to India's national security.

In August 2014, the Observer Research Foundation's National Security Initiative, headed by Distinguished Fellow, Dr Manoj Joshi organised a workshop to re-examine India's nuclear doctrine and NFU. The workshop explored the challenges posed to India by Pakistan's introduction of battlefield nuclear weapons or Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNWs), New Delhi's interest in acquiring a Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system, and the growing threat perception from China.

The workshop was keynoted by Ambassador Shyam Saran and, thereafter, the first session was chaired by Dr. C. Raja Mohan, Head of ORF's Strategic Studies Programme. The first session focused on issues specific to India's nuclear doctrine. The second session then explored global trends in nuclear

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doctrines and where India stood in comparison. Prof. Rajesh Rajagopalan then set the tone for further discussion with his presentation as Dr. Manoj Joshi moderated the session.

The key points that emerged from the discussions are the following:

- India needs to make its nuclear doctrine public in order to avoid misunderstanding or miscalculation in an ever-changing global and regional security environment. The lack of information in the public domain has created a perception that India lacks a defined doctrine or that if there was, it was flawed.
- India's nuclear deterrent is to deter nuclear threats and attacks. It is not meant to achieve a deterrent against conventional weapons.
- No First Use (NFU) policy takes into account the very specific security environment surrounding India, given the relationship between Pakistan and China.
- Tactical nuclear weapons being deployed by Pakistan will have a strategic impact if used. Any weapon which requires the authority of the national command authority is strategic; no distinction exists.
- In the backdrop of reduced interest on disarmament, countries around the world are making qualitative improvements to their nuclear weapons while reducing the quantitative part of their arsenals.
- Doubts exist about China's NFU, and their idea about de-escalation using nuclear weapons is complicated. Their forces are oriented towards retaliation and not nuclear war fighting.

This report will delve into the historical context within which India's nuclear doctrine must be viewed. The following section outlines India's experience with nuclear weapons, based on Amb. Shyam Saran's presentation and the discussions that ensued. The report will also outline the current global nuclear deterrence trends and patterns based on Prof. Rajesh Rajagopalan's presentation. The report concludes with a set of recommendations drawn from the discussions at the workshop.

Evolution of India's Nuclear Weapon Policy

India has maintained the capability to assemble nuclear weapons and developed a delivery capability, long before it became a declared nuclear weapons state in May, 1998 through a series of nuclear tests. India had been developing and maintaining its national capability to develop strategic assets for over three decades before that. This evolution was influenced by a number of developments in its security environment.

1. China's testing of nuclear weapons in 1964.
2. The conclusion of the Non-proliferation Treaty in 1968, which sought to prevent the emergence of any new nuclear weapons states.
3. The 1971 Bangladesh War and its aftermath, which saw strategic convergence between the US and China.

4. Reports that China delivered a tested nuclear weapon to Pakistan in 1983.

The 1990s were marked by serious debate within India's changing political leadership about the implications of testing nuclear weapons given the economic climate and its timing in relation to international developments. The precipitating factor proved to be the effort in 1996 to push through with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which would have permanently foreclosed India's options of developing a fully tested nuclear deterrent. It would have increased India's vulnerability vis-a-vis its adversaries as its quest for strategic autonomy would have been undermined. These concerns were articulated in the Draft Nuclear Doctrine released in 1999.

It is imperative to keep in mind the historical background when analysing India's going nuclear in 1998. It was not merely an episode driven by domestic compulsions; rather it was the culmination of the evolution of strategic thinking which started decades earlier. The decision to become a declared nuclear weapons state in the late 90s led to new and more complex challenges for India. These challenges involve the nature and structure of India's nuclear weapon arsenal as well as its delivery assets. The country has been putting in place delivery systems which match its declared doctrine of NFU and retaliation only.

Making India's Nuclear Doctrine Credible

'The Indian security establishment is fairly clear in its mind as to the nature of the threats that it confronts and what it needs to meet those threats.' - Amb. Shyam Saran

Amb. Saran began his presentation by saying that it would do India well to make its nuclear doctrine public as a lack of transparency only serves to create suspicion and misunderstanding. To claim to have a nuclear doctrine and then only selectively allow certain pieces of it in the public domain, creates difficulty in terms of making sure that your own citizens, your allies and adversaries, know exactly what is at stake. He went on to discuss Pakistan's acquisition of TNWs and said that, if these are tactical weapons but their use can only be allowed by the national command authority then are they tactical weapons, are they battlefield weapons, or are they strategic weapons?

Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal is itself a cause for worry. In 2011, Pakistan conducted its first test flight of the short-range surface to surface missile the Hatf IX (NASR). It was described to have a range of 60 kilometres and was reported to be able to carry nuclear weapons of appropriate yields. Its development has been keenly followed by India. These short-range nuclear tipped missiles are meant to target Indian military formations on the battlefield and not Indian cities. In this way, Pakistan aims at offsetting India's plans of using conventional military forces at the tactical level, even while staying below the nuclear threshold. The chair of the session, ORF Distinguished Fellow, Dr. C. Raja Mohan observed that historically there has been a difference between declared doctrine and the operational doctrine. As a result there is that level of differentiation between what is said and what is done by forces on the ground. The Pakistani doctrine is a lift from that: Look, India has conventional

superiority, and therefore, I need tactical nuclear weapons. The problem, of course, is that the geographic context is different. Between Lahore and Amritsar there is not much distance. You can do what you want with your grand nuclear doctrine, but the distance between Lahore and Amritsar limits the number of ways in which these scenarios can be thought about. The discussion turned to India's overall approach towards Pakistan and how its possession of nuclear weapons has limited India's options. There is also the failure on India's part of not having been able to develop a full spectrum of capabilities to address Islamabad's strategic calculus.

Amb. Saran went on to add, that while one could perhaps criticise the Indian nuclear doctrine and make calls for its revision, the country had a doctrine, to begin with: What was important for India's credibility was whether or not the country was putting in place the kind of assets which would make such doctrine credible. While the importance of a stated doctrine cannot be underscored, it was equally essential for India to address the issue of nuclear assets, delivery capabilities, safety procedures, among others, to make that doctrine credible. It must be acknowledged that the third end of the India's nuclear triad, the submarine based nuclear systems, are not entirely in place. India's first nuclear submarine is currently undergoing sea trials and will be in place fairly soon; that eventuality should end the argument of whether or not the doctrine is matched by capabilities. Amb. Saran noted that there was constant review and regular focus on the part of the authorities to make India's capabilities as robust as possible in keeping with the principle of maintaining a credible minimum deterrent.

India's own past record, whether it was in relation to the Mumbai attacks of 2008 or the 1993 blasts in the same city, shows a mixed record in terms of retaliation and raises questions about whether, when it comes to the nuclear issue, the political class will have sufficient gumption to ensure assured retaliation. Amb. Saran added that it is very important to give credibility to the doctrine as far as the public was concerned. There has been a lack of application at the political level, but this is something which has been a continuing problem that needed to be addressed. If the public views the political leadership as weak-kneed and without the capability to respond, then it hardly makes a difference whether the response is nuclear or conventional. Any policy thus depends on effective political leadership. Given the country's political system, a belief that the political leadership does not have the will to retaliate and that the doctrine, to begin with, needs revision, is dangerous. What is needed is coherent political leadership which is in a position to take decisions. Its decisions such as not to retaliate after the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, can be questioned, but the political leadership's right to take such a decision, cannot. The idea of revising India's doctrine—to give the military a role of primacy in making such decisions because of a lack of confidence in the political leadership—is dangerous.

Responses:

During Question and Answer, the need to revise India's nuclear doctrine after re-assessing the Chinese threat was raised. Participants were of the opinion that it was important to take cognizance

of China's actions in the event of a conventional or nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. Also raised was the fact that the nuclear weapons in Pakistan are controlled by the military establishment and the existence of both jihadi and non-jihadi elements in or proximate to that organisation.

Christine Fair's recent book, called *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War*, was brought up in the discussions. The book discusses how the Pakistan army fights and has called Pakistan an 'unreasonable revisionist state' which says that no matter how many times you beat it down, it will still come up. According to the book, the main aim or national strategy of Pakistan and its armed forces is to make sure: (a) that the existential "threat from India" does not overcome them; (b) to prevent at any cost the regional rise or hegemony of India; and (c) also to interrupt or interdict India's rise as a global power or a global entity. Participants pointed out that Pakistan's ownership of nuclear weapons has limited India's options. The general sense is that, India has failed to respond to attacks by Pakistan or attacks that have emanated from Pakistan for more than a decade. The Kargil War of 1999, the Parliament attack of 2001, or the 26/11 Mumbai attack—they have all gone by without a strong response from India. While in the public domain, there exists talk of 'Cold Start Doctrine' and ideas of limited war under the nuclear threshold, the fear of escalation has constrained India.

India's military build-up in the face of threats from both sides has been significant over the last decade or so, putting it way ahead of its neighbour Pakistan in terms of technology. The fact remains, however, that despite a quantum leap in military technology, India has had little success in developing a comprehensive, yet credible, defence posture against the wide spectrum of threats that it faces, both nuclear and conventional.

Global and Regional Trends in Nuclear Doctrines

Pakistan would not reach for the nuclear trigger unless our tanks are standing outside Rawalpindi, but it is going to be little bit difficult to convince our political leaders that they can take such a risk, according to Prof. Rajesh Rajagopalan. The second session of the workshop explored a wider view of nuclear doctrine and the global trends associated with a firm focus on India's nuclear policy.

Prof. Rajagopalan began the discussion by saying that the last 10 years have seen a good amount of discussion about nuclear disarmament, especially after US President Barack Obama first came to power. However, that phase is over. Around the world, countries are doubling down on nuclear deterrence, though the manner in which nuclear weapons are seen to deter or are used for deterrence are different. Though there is not a single trend in as far as nuclear doctrines go, there is an emerging pattern: that every country around the world is improving its nuclear arsenal. That improvement is a qualitative improvement. It is not in most cases a quantitative improvement. Quantitatively, at least, four of the five nuclear powers are reducing their arsenals. There exists a concern that China may be increasing its arsenal, but to a large degree the numbers of the other four are coming down. Though the numbers are not as much as they were over the last decade, there has been a slowdown in the reduction but there is a reduction in terms of the quantitative aspect.

While no single trend exists in terms of nuclear doctrines, current doctrines of the nine countries that possess nuclear weapons can be broadly classified into three or four different categories. States that worry about survival, i.e. Israel and Pakistan, are one category. North Korea and Iran are a slightly different category: they worry about survival, but they worry more about regime survival than state survival. Countries that worry about state survival, especially Pakistan and Israel have very similar approaches towards nuclear doctrines which can be summarised as first-use of nuclear weapons, but as a last resort. Pakistan and Israel can both be characterised similarly on these parameters. Israeli doctrine can be characterised as the 'Samson' option, which is to say that if we go down we will take everybody down with us. Whether Pakistan has a similar approach is a matter of conjecture: It is not that they are planning to try take everybody down with them but they are definitely planning to take India with them, if they ever plan to go down.

The second category of states, Russia is somewhat similar to the first category of states that worry about survival. Russia does not worry about survival *per se*, but Russia does about the fact that it is conventionally much weaker now compared to NATO. As NATO or the West advances further and further eastward, the classic Russian paranoia is getting the better of them and clearly driving changes in their nuclear doctrine.

In the third category are countries that have assured retaliation strategies, namely, India, China, and even the US. The US does not have a declared NFU policy, but has as recently as 2010 declared that the role of nuclear weapons will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist. It has, however, limited the use of such weapons in the event of an attack other than nuclear.

India and China are both conventionally strong states; they do not face significant conventional threats. There exists speculation about the Sino-Indian border, even if India loses a war on the border, it does not worry about survival in the way Pakistan does, and therefore the pressure on India in terms of the insecurity, it is a fundamentally different level of insecurity than that faced by Pakistan. India has ambitions, it wants to be a global power, it worries about China on the border but India does not think that its survival as a state, as a society is threatened. The last category are Britain and France, both of which can be characterised as legacy deterrents. They have nuclear weapons, but they do not know what to do with them. Both countries have a deterrence logic that is not very clear partly because they do not have any adversaries that pose such grave threat against them.

Pakistan had started its nuclear programme as a mechanism for survival after 1971 or early 1972 in the aftermath of losing East Pakistan. While it started out as a survival mechanism, the idea of taking Kashmir back as another additional option for their nuclear weapons came about in time. A clear contradiction in the Pakistani nuclear doctrine as pursuing both options or objectives is not feasible. The nuclearisation of Pakistan has frozen the Line of Control and its border with India, a scenario which was not envisaged by the Pakistani establishment. India, too, has been trying to figure out a way to get out of this trap of nuclearisation and the need to figure out how to bring conventional forces to bear. Pakistan's talk about tactical nuclear weapons is a response to that.

After 2010 India stated that it does not have any Cold Start doctrine. The lack of a conventional strategy has put India in a bind as it does not know how to respond to Pakistan under a nuclear umbrella. Whether or not Pakistan is in possession of tactical nuclear weapons, and whether India believes it or not—it has become difficult to exclude the possibility. India needs to come up with an alternative strategy which would negate the conditions for a tactical nuclear strike by Pakistan on conventional forces from India. The condition being, the threat to make significant advances into Pakistani territory.

Moderating the session, ORF's Distinguished Fellow, Manoj Joshi, recalled a meeting that he had in 2002 with then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the backdrop of the attack on the Indian Parliament, and the subsequent deployment of the Indian military under Operation Parakram. On being asked why India did not go after Pakistan in the wake of the attack on the Parliament, The PM replied, '*Hum ne un se kaha jaayie, par woh nahi ja paaye* (We told them to go, they could not go).' The attack took place on December 13, and the US President got in touch with India on December 26. The US expected an Indian response and expected to intervene in the aftermath. Indian forces, however, were unable to mobilise fast enough to launch a response. By the time they mobilised, Gen. Pervez Musharraf undercut with a typical Pakistani ploy claiming that Pakistani territory would no longer be used for such attacks. A position after which, it became hard for India to press on with any attack.

China's military modernisation and the acquisition of certain weapons systems is beginning to indicate that their nuclear doctrine has gone beyond one of retaliation. China has made advancements in the development of missiles, the recent DF-41 has a range of 12000 kilometers with Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicles (MIRV). While it can be used defensively, it can be primarily classified as an offensive weapon system. The participants noted that the allocation for non-proliferation in the China's defence budget has gone down and allocation for modernisation of nuclear weapons has gone up. China's "No First Use" policy includes a pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. India does not figure in China's policy of NFU.

Responses:

The panellists agreed on the need to debate the contradictions in China's nuclear doctrine. There exist tensions between the military and the political elite about what the doctrine should be. China has also had the same internal discussions as those in India about NFU being insufficient and the need to do something better and stronger. So far, however, the size of China's nuclear arsenal and their doctrinal emphasis on the survivability of their arsenal appeared to point to a continuance of an NFU policy.

Discussants pointed out that a doctrine is really a set of beliefs; it is not a policy. Policy flows from doctrine. The Americans call it posture, it is their nuclear policy. That can be reviewed, revised, in fact probably should be. Since 2003 there has been no public official policy pronouncement either in terms of a white paper, statements to parliament on nuclear policy. Policy has been jumbled together with doctrine.

During the question and answer session the discussion turned back towards Pakistan. Participants discussing the rationale of Pakistan going nuclear, suggested that Pakistan was actually not threatened in its survival, but that it was using this narrative as a way of pursuing its purely revisionist agenda. Pakistan's nuclear policy was claimed to be one with that of Israel as both possess them for state survival.

The difference to Israel is obviously that, it has been the declared policy of several of its neighbours to wipe out Israel from the map of the Middle East: it is a clear existential threat. Nothing of this sort is known to be the case in the case of Pakistan's neighbours, including India. There exists a need for India to get out of this current strategic impasse in order to concentrate on changing this narrative of Pakistan. Academic discussion is not going to get India out of this box. There are currently two schools of thought exploring alternatives to help India get out of this strategic box. One school suggests that India tweak the doctrine. The argument against this doctrine is that, India has conventional strength and alternatives and these need to be explored and strengthened. While India has conventional alternatives, the experience with it has been bad. In 2001 after the attack on the Indian parliament, there was a discussion between the political authority and the military and the latter suggested certain military alternatives which were turned down by the political authority. The result was that no action was taken against Pakistan.

Conclusions:

While India's conventional capabilities have significantly advanced over the years with the induction of technologically superior military hardware, the political leadership's disengagement from security issues may have serious ramifications if they were to turn to a limited war strategy in a crisis without having evaluated the risks. The need of the hour as inferred from both the sessions was for India to develop and field a comprehensive spectrum of options which fulfil India's deterrence and strategic needs. There also exists a need for it to review its command and control structures for India's strategic forces. The lack of information on the progress made in modernising and operationalising India's strategic assets has resulted in an information vacuum that, in turn, has led to speculation. The government needs to release more data and its nuclear policy into the public domain not only to keep its citizens informed, but also to reduce any misunderstanding with neighbouring nuclear states about India's intent.

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