

Leveraging the Atom? Nuclear Weapons in Indian Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT How have nuclear weapons affected Indian foreign policy? Has India been able to leverage its status as a nuclear weapons state to further its foreign policy objectives? This issue brief examines these questions by first analysing how India's foreign policy objectives have been affected by its possession of nuclear weapons. It then posits two strategies that India can pursue to leverage its status as a nuclear weapons state. The first strategy deals with India's engagement with the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime and an expansion of its leadership role within it. The second discusses how India can leverage its nuclear weapons status better, to balance China's expansionist ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.

(This brief is part of ORF's series, '20 Years of Pokhran-II'. Read all the papers in the series here: <https://www.orfonline.org/series/20-years-of-pokhran-II/>)

INTRODUCTION

India has been a nuclear weapons state for 20 years. Has this affected India's foreign policy in a direct manner? Possessing nuclear weapons can confer a state increased leverage to conduct foreign policy in both regional and international contexts. This brief examines the role of nuclear weapons in Indian foreign policy following the 1998 nuclear weapons tests. It identifies the ways in which acquiring nuclear weapons has

affected, and can affect, Indian foreign policy. India has had to make certain strategic choices privileging multilateral regime membership over other concerns. While this has accrued India short-term dividends, in the medium to long term, there is no cohesive strategy to leverage (i.e. use to maximum advantage) its nuclear weapons status in foreign policy. This brief explores why this is so, and what other strategies can be taken

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by India to leverage its status of being a nuclear weapons state.

There are two ways in which the possession of nuclear weapons can affect a state's conduct of foreign policy and diplomacy. The first involves military and strategic signalling. This includes military-oriented functions of deterrence, compellence, coercion, and brinkmanship.¹ The second, which is the focus of this brief, deals with non-military affairs. This involves foreign relations with states at a bilateral and multilateral level, and relations with and within formal international institutions and regional organisations such as the UN, SAARC, SCO, and BIMSTEC, and informal regimes (including the Nuclear Suppliers Group, Australia Group, and Wassenaar Arrangement).

The brief will first examine which foreign policy objectives of India can be affected by the presence of nuclear weapons, and how. It will then explore how nuclear weapons have affected Indian foreign policy, especially with regard to its focus on attaining membership in export control regimes. The brief will then posit two strategies that India can adopt to expand the foreign policy leverage of possessing nuclear weapons. The first strategy deals with India's engagement with the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime and an expansion of its leadership role within it. The second deals with how India can leverage its nuclear weapons status better to balance China in the Indo-Pacific region. The article concludes with a summary of the strategies proposed.

WHICH FOREIGN POLICY AND HOW?

To understand how nuclear weapons are likely to affect Indian foreign policy, it is important

to first understand which aspects of foreign policy India is expected to maximise through the leveraging of nuclear weapons. In the last few years, five aspects of Indian foreign policy have either gained or maintained primacy. As Dhruva Jaishankar writes, these are: i. increase of Indian leadership in international forums of governance; ii. balance of power in the Indo-Pacific; iii. an integrated neighbourhood in South Asia with India as a lynchpin; iv. engaging cross-border terrorism; and v. use of international partnerships to further domestic development.² This brief focuses on how the first two of these interests of Indian foreign policy could be furthered through the leveraging of India's status as a nuclear weapons state.

To be clear, none of the strategies discussed in this brief involve the direct military use, or *threat* of use, of nuclear weapons. Instead, the discussion about leveraging nuclear weapons is limited to the slightly nebulous concept of diplomatic and status-related advantages that possession of nuclear weapons may afford a state. This analysis assumes that power is fungible and the possession of certain types of military power can be used in non-military theatres of operation.³ In this case, the non-military theatre of operation is diplomacy and foreign policy.

As Mark Bell points out in his study of foreign policy behaviour, there is a general assumption that nuclear weapons "embolden" states that acquire them; how this actually bears out in foreign policy, however, is worth examining.⁴ For Bell, there are six ways in which this can be thought of: aggression, expansion, independence, bolstering, steadfastness, and compromise.⁵ The case of India posits an additional category – legitimisation. In this case,

the process of legitimation involves a state attempting to regain legitimacy following a setback in diplomatic status as a result of sanctions and international opprobrium.⁶ India's foreign policy behaviour after acquiring nuclear weapons has been marked by this pursuit of gaining legitimacy to become a "responsible nuclear power."⁷ This policy has manifested itself in India having a foreign policy *despite* the possession of nuclear weapons instead of having a foreign policy that is "emboldened" – an uncharacteristic outcome for a nuclear weapons state.

THE STORY THUS FAR: REGIME MEMBERSHIP AND GAINING LEGITIMACY

In the two decades since conducting nuclear weapons tests in 1998, India has focused considerably on regaining legitimacy through membership in multilateral technology control regimes.⁸ Acceptance into the same order that made India a pariah state in the aftermath of the 1974 'Peaceful Nuclear Explosion' has been of paramount importance to obtain legitimacy. This process started soon after 1998 and resulted in the India-US nuclear deal of 2008.⁹ However, the most important outcome coming out of this event was the NSG waiver that allowed the deal to go through.¹⁰ India gained considerable legitimacy, but continued to remain an outlier to the nuclear order without membership in any of the main nuclear non-proliferation and export control regimes – the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the NSG, the Australia Group, Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR).¹¹ This search for legitimacy prompted a push towards membership into the latter four export control regimes.

The lack of membership in these regimes after 2008 did not stop India from concluding at least eleven nuclear deals with other states. Among others, France, Russia, Japan, Canada, Kazakhstan, Australia have all concluded deals with India in this period. Membership in export control regimes was thus no longer an impediment to nuclear trade, but a vehicle to gain greater legitimacy.¹² It is important to note that this push for membership has been a largely successful venture. As of 2018, India is a member of three of the four aforementioned regimes, and the NSG continues to be the sole holdout owing to Chinese opposition.¹³ The conclusion of nuclear deals with multiple states also displays the widespread recognition of India as a "responsible nuclear state".¹⁴

LEGITIMATION AND LEADERSHIP: MULTILATERAL ARMS CONTROL AND THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER

While India's policy on nuclear disarmament remains broadly the same, its behaviour towards the regime has changed. While it remains committed to "universal, verifiable, and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament," India has now changed tack to more conventional nuclear weapons state behaviour.¹⁵ Along with the other nuclear weapons states, it has boycotted negotiations on the treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons as India believes that the treaty in no way "constitutes or contributes to the development of any customary international law."¹⁶

India's non-engagement with the nuclear ban movement demonstrates that while India may principally remain in favour of multi-lateral disarmament, it will no longer play the

kind of active role toward this end like it has done before. This marks a break from the legacy of Indian participation in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty negotiations, and of former prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi's proposed multilateral frameworks for disarmament. The larger problem this demonstrates is the paradox of India's commitment to multilateralism in nuclear disarmament, and at the same time, of it being a full-time nuclear weapons state.¹⁷

This is one area in which the acquisition of nuclear weapons has had a negative effect. For all the legitimacy that it seeks to garner through membership in export control regimes through "responsible behaviour", a betrayal of its past position has two implications. First, it implies that the commitment to disarmament displayed by India from the 1950s to the 1998 was "cheap talk" and India was only biding its time to become a full-fledged nuclear weapons power. Second, it exposes India's oft-repeated commitment to "universal, verifiable, and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament" as hypocritical.

In the short to medium term, India does not have to give up its nuclear weapons or even reduce its arsenal in order to stay the course on its nuclear disarmament policy. Nuclear disarmament is far from the agenda of any of the nuclear weapons states. However, this does not mean that India cannot use its position as a nuclear weapons power to push for incremental multilateral commitments towards arms control. One such policy would be the negotiation of a multilateral agreement on the global "no first use" of nuclear weapons. India has made

separate statements about this in the past, but there has not been any concerted campaign towards the goal.¹⁸

A concerted effort towards a multilateral agreement on the 'no first use' of nuclear weapons would have three advantages.¹⁹ First, the export control regime membership focus of Indian foreign policy has nearly been achieved with only one more regime (i.e., NSG) to become a member of. Given that this has become a bilateral issue between India and China, India is in need of a new foreign policy objective on this front. This would thus allow India to continue on its path of seeking legitimacy by tackling a core disarmament issue. Second, this strategy would also ensure continuity with its historical position on nuclear disarmament and arms control. This would salvage, to some extent, the fall-out from its past position on the nuclear ban movement. Third, it would be an extremely low-stakes policy for India to structure a diplomatic campaign around, as it has already committed itself to a policy of 'no first use' in its doctrine.²⁰ This ensures that there would be no domestic interest groups to lobby or negotiate with.

The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) is another regime that India can engage without compromising on its stated foreign policy and security goals.²¹ There are two ways in which to engage with this regime. The first is the lowest hanging fruit in this regard – setting up the proposed International Monitoring System (IMS) stations in India.²² Given that India has a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing and does not need to conduct any more nuclear tests, setting up facilities to monitor nuclear explosions in the region would do it no harm and allow it to informally be a part of the

CTBTO network without signing the treaty.²³ The second way to engage with this regime is to join it.²⁴ The treaty can only come into force “180 days after the ratification of the 44 States listed in Annex 2.”²⁵ Given that the United States and China are both “Annex 2” states, the treaty cannot come into force without their signature. This means that India does not have to wait for the United States to ratify CTBT to sign it and can proceed unilaterally. As Happymon Jacob suggests, this has the potential to “rekindle the disarmament momentum.”²⁶

As a nuclear weapons state, India is in a unique position to advance the conversation on nuclear disarmament and arms control, with little compromise on its own security and foreign policy interests. If anything, this direction would be the next logical step of gaining more legitimacy and leveraging its nuclear weapons status to further its long-term foreign policy objectives.

EMBOLDENMENT AND EXPANSION: BALANCING CHINA IN THE INDO- PACIFIC

Acquiring nuclear weapons has not had any tangible effect on India’s diplomatic relations in South Asia, and the extended South East Asian region. With Pakistan, for instance, it was unable to prevent the war in 1999, nor a considerable number of terrorist attacks. Ceasefire violations too continue unabated.²⁷ With China, there has been a fractious relationship especially with regard to border skirmishes and standoffs.²⁸ There is also considerable anxiety in New Delhi about the growing Chinese influence in its immediate neighbourhood – Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.²⁹ How can India

leverage its nuclear weapons status in its immediate neighbourhood to further its foreign policy objectives?

Balancing China is a long-term foreign policy objective for India. In its quest for legitimacy as a nuclear weapons power, India has aspired to be a benevolent—perhaps even benign—nuclear weapons state. It has thus sought to keep away from compellent threats, and the threat of use of nuclear weapons to attain foreign policy objectives. To be clear, this is a good thing, and does not need to be a constraint for Indian foreign policy leverage. Given that India considers nuclear weapons to be tools of deterrence and not of war-fighting, there is little scope for it to interfere in the business of its neighbours and threaten nuclear retribution – again, *a good thing*. However, India does have a China problem and it needs to be able to leverage its increased military capacity indirectly in order to balance China in its immediate region.³⁰

Given that both countries are nuclear powers (albeit both with ‘no first use’ policies), a direct confrontation with China is not desirable and India should actively seek to avoid it. It should also be reiterated that a state need not directly brandish its nuclear weapons in order to gain diplomatic leverage. As has been mentioned earlier, power is fungible. The status of being a nuclear weapons state can thus allow India to operate with greater leeway in its neighbourhood than it currently does. There are indirect ways of countering increased Chinese economic and strategic footprint in South Asia. This involves India being more diplomatically active in the Indo-Pacific region. As a nuclear weapons state with aspirations of regional dominance, India does not need to play second fiddle to

China in its own neighbourhood. India's status as a nuclear weapons power allows it leverage to be more proactive in the Indo-Pacific region and balance China without facing retribution. This status also makes India a viable alternative for smaller states to gravitate to.

What proactive diplomatic measures can India take in the Indo-Pacific to achieve its policy of balancing China? First, India will have to increase its own political and economic footprint in the region. This could be achieved by developing a campaign to create multilateral sea-based infrastructure development and connectivity projects in the Indo-Pacific. In other words, a sea version of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would be ideal for India to check Chinese ascendancy in the region.³¹ Second, India needs to take an active role in formalising the 'Quad'— the informal grouping of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia to check Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific.³² This would involve either annual or biennial naval exercises and eventual joint patrols in the region. Thus far, India has been a junior partner of the United States in this grouping and heavily reliant on it. This will need to change if India has to gain some control of the region. Third, if India is to leverage its status of being nuclear weapons power and square it with its regional aspirations, it will need to be a more proactive – but even-handed – partner for the smaller states in the South Asian region. Something it has not been doing, especially in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Maldives.³³ These partnerships will need strong, regional economic, infrastructure and defence-based cooperation. Finally, Indian diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific needs to develop along two planks

– defence cooperation and assertive signalling. On the defence cooperation front, India has already been involved in selling weapons systems like the BrahMos missile (jointly developed with Russia) to Vietnam. However, there was some hesitation in doing so on account of the possible reaction from China.³⁴ While a bold step, like many other aspects of Indian foreign policy this was an ad-hoc decision and not part of a larger strategy. As a nuclear weapons state with the wherewithal to forge defence relationships in China's backyard, India needs to develop a strategy involving other interested countries in the Indo-Pacific (such as Indonesia) to build more enduring relationships to balance China.

On the assertive signalling front, India can engage in sea-based diplomacy in the form of sending out its nuclear submarines and aircraft carrier on port calls in countries like Iran, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Australia. India has been looking to transform its Navy from a coastal defence role to more of a 'blue water' navy.³⁵ While many challenges remain in this process, India has the capacity to engage in more assertive signalling on this front in the Indian Ocean region. It should be noted that defence cooperation and assertive signalling are not mutually exclusive and can be undertaken together.

CONCLUSION

India's nuclear weapons power status has not been fully leveraged in the pursuit of its foreign policy objectives. India has sought to gain greater legitimacy in the international order in the aftermath of acquiring nuclear weapons. However, beyond regime membership into the MTCR, Wassenaar Arrangement, and the

Australia Group, India has not really leveraged its nuclear weapons power status. This is curious, given that studies of nuclear weapons states expect them to behave in ways that “embolden” or “bolster” their foreign policy behaviour. This brief has argued that given that India has gained membership into three of the four regimes in the last 20 years, there needs to be a reorientation of Indian foreign policy to leverage its nuclear weapons status. There are two ways in which this can be done. The first is a measured strategy which involves taking forward India’s aim to gaining further legitimacy in the international order as a nuclear weapons state. This strategy would require India to come to terms with its historical commitment towards universal disarmament and its relatively recent status as a nuclear weapons power. To do this, India must:

- i) Develop a diplomatic campaign towards a multilateral agreement on the ‘no first use’ of nuclear weapons.
- ii) Join the CTBTO Preparatory Commission’s International Monitoring System process.
- iii) Unilaterally sign the CTBT – given that it will not come into force without the US and other states signing and ratifying it first.

The second strategy involves a more proactive campaign in the Indo-Pacific region aimed at balancing China – already a long-term foreign policy objective of India. This requires India to:

- i) Develop a strategy towards a sea-based multilateral infrastructure development and connectivity project.
- ii) Formalise the ‘Quad’ as an alliance and move towards institutionalised formal naval exercises on an annual or biennial basis.
- iii) Increase economic and defence partnerships with states like Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Nepal in an even-handed manner.
- iv) Undertake greater defence cooperation and assertive signalling in the Indo-Pacific through the sale of defence systems and port calls by naval vessels.

These two strategies are not mutually exclusive and can be undertaken simultaneously if required. It should be noted that India’s quest to be a “responsible nuclear state” has given it considerable diplomatic capital in the West. It would be unfortunate for India to squander such gain owing to the lack of carefully considered foreign policy that leverages its nuclear status for its national interest. [ORF](#)

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ENDNOTES

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