



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 351

July 2022

## India's NFU Stance : Need to Change Amidst the Changing Strategic Landscape



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*“An important variable affecting escalation dominance, is each side’s relative fear of eruption of violence. That side which has least to lose by eruption, or fears the eruption the least, will automatically have an element of escalation dominance”.*

—Herman Kahn

### Introduction

Alongside the waning COVID pandemic, the world is witnessing a complex re-alignment of geo-strategic relationships amongst major military powers— Chinese avarice for superpower status, waning US influence in Asia-Pacific, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and nuclear belligerence

of North Korea. Closer home, ‘bellicose’ China has embarked on the fastest expansion of nuclear forces, the world has ever witnessed; while the ‘revanchist’ Pakistan continues to seek impunity against an Indian retaliation through an ambiguous ‘Full Spectrum Nuclear Deterrence’. Amidst all this, there seems to be an epiphany that ‘nuclear weapons could

### Key Points

- Amidst rising geopolitical tensions, the global nuclear landscape is fast changing. Due to such changes, the existing international treaties are under tremendous strain to control proliferation of nuclear weapons.
- Despite facing a precarious security situation in a nuclearised neighbourhood, India has so far stood-fast with its nuclear policy of NFU, which has established India as a responsible nuclear state.
- Many strategic thinkers and research scholars have questioned continued relevance of the NFU doctrine in face of fast emerging two front threats being faced by India.
- Is there a case in point for India to re-consider its nuclear doctrine? If so, then how can nuclear deterrence be best leveraged for Indian national security objectives without lowering the nuclear threshold in the subcontinent?

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endow absolute security guarantees to small and militarily weak countries while also providing impunity to the powerful Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) to pursue conventional wars’.

Amidst the ongoing churning of security dynamics, India has effectively called off the Pakistani nuclear bluff. However, the Chinese threat, along Northern borders, and a collusive China-Pakistan threat, manifesting in the form a ‘two front war’, can no more be swept under the carpet and India will have to include such a contingency in its national security stratagem. If so happens then, can India fight and hope to deter a credible adversary solely through its conventional forces, while its strategic forces continue to be restrained by the ‘No First Use’ (NFU) pledge?

### **Evolving Nuclear Landscape**

- ***Stressed US – Russia Nuclear Relationship.*** While they are still bound by the bilateral ‘New START’ Treaty, the post Cold War era of US–Russia nuclear bonhomie is over now. US has increasingly echoed the sentiment that while it has ‘refrained’ from taking up nuclear modernisation owing to arms control instruments, ‘others had gone on to build new capabilities’— Russia by violating existing arms control instruments and China by not being part of any.<sup>1</sup> Resultantly, after decades of self-imposed restraint, a massive technological upgradation of US and Russian Nuclear Forces is now underway. While USA wants the Russian influence on global affairs to be contained on one hand, however, on the other hand, the Russia- Ukraine conflict has amply demonstrated that USA will not take a Russian bullet—nuclear or otherwise — for any ally (Japan, South Korea), quasi-ally (Ukraine, Taiwan), or strategic partner (India).<sup>2</sup>
- ***Widening US-China Schism.*** As China refuses to join any Arms Control Treaty, the schism in US-China relations has only widened and latest developments in the South China Sea have further sown mutual distrust. With the collapse of INF Treaty, the USA is hoping to deploy new ground based Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) to Asia “sooner than later”.<sup>3</sup> Analysts feel that such bases could be either in US territory of Guam or in territories of Japan, South Korea, and Australia. China, on other hand will take effective countermeasures if the US deploys ground based IRBMs in this part of the world—deploying missiles at doorstep of China would be a provocative action and could be lead to dangerous consequences”.<sup>4</sup> China has flexed its economic muscle in the past to

threaten the American allies, as it did with South Korea after it allowed the US to install an anti-missile system in its land.

- **Rapid Modernisation : Chinese Nuclear Forces.** While maintaining the 'NFU' policy, China has carried out massive re-organisation of its strategic forces wherein its nuclear arsenal is slated to grow from current 350 warheads to 1,000 warheads by 2030.<sup>5</sup> It has also steadily replaced its salvo based ICBMs with mobile missile launchers comprising Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) warheads. China's enhanced capability of nuclear armed IRBMs (DF-26) and ICBMs (DF-41) alongwith newly developed Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (DF-17) have further complicated the nuclear deterrence equation vis-a vis USA and India.

**Figure 1: Under Construction ICBM silos in Central China**



Source: 'China is Building a Second Nuclear Missile Silo Field' published by Federation of American Scientists

- **Pakistan's India Centric Nuclear Program.** For Pakistan, nuclear weapons are a way to counter "superiority of India's conventional forces" which has slowly evolved into a visceral practice of waging a sub- conventional war against India under threats of nuclear escalation that is Pakistan's military leaders have deliberately attempted to project an irrational strategy of 'wider the conventional asymmetry, lower the nuclear threshold'.<sup>6</sup> Driven by the 'rationally irrational nuclear strategy', the more India contemplates conventional military operations, the more Pakistan leaders will raise the bogey of first use of nuclear weapons.

**Figure 2: Shaheen IRBM**

Source: <https://nuke.fas.org/guide/pakistan/missile/shaheen-2>

## **Constructs: Indian Nuclear Doctrine**

### ***Positive Construct : Indian Nuclear Doctrine***

Having analysed the emerging nuclear landscape, let's examine the basic constructs of the Indian Nuclear Doctrines. The Indian nuclear doctrine principally follows a contractual construct— it involves instrumental motivations, a contract of promise and benefits in hope of a quid pro quo exchange of promises / assurances. Most other nuclear weapon states, on the contrary, follows a coercive construct, also a quid pro quo exchange, but an exchange of threats and punishments — a negative promise of nuclear destruction.

### ***Key Elements : Indian Nuclear Doctrine***

The key features of the Indian Nuclear Doctrine includes Maintenance of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD), No First Use (NFU), Massive Retaliation to a nuclear attack and Political Control of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>7</sup> It can be debated if such a posture was adopted due to reasons of India's dominant strategic culture of restraint, political considerations or a perceived military logic. Nevertheless, the twinning of 'NFU' and 'massive retaliation clause' of the nuclear doctrine can be deciphered as follows:

- **No First Use (NFU).** The doctrine stipulates, on one hand, 'non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states' and on the other hand, states that , nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on the Indian Territory or on Indian Forces anywhere. However, in case of a major attack against India, or Indian Forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons. It must be noted that, although the draft National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) report of 1999

mentioned an option of “Nuclear retaliation if threatened” by a nuclear attack<sup>8</sup>, but the finalised nuclear doctrine of 2003 stipulated “nuclear retaliation only in case of nuclear attack”.

- **Massive Retaliation.** The arcane principle of ‘massive retaliation’ rests on sole conviction that, once the nuclear threshold is broken, there will be no distinction between tactical or strategic strikes and any nuclear weapon use will escalate quickly to a strategic level. Since, the purpose of India’s nuclear weapons is primarily to deter a first nuclear strike, therefore, treats all nuclear strikes in same manner and seeks to use ‘massive retaliation’ threat as an ultimate deterrence.

### Why India Chose NFU Policy ?

In the first two parts we have looked into the global nuclear landscape and the basic constructs of the Indian Nuclear Doctrine. Before moving on to analyse the continued relevance of the doctrine, it is imperative to look into the probable reasons which led to adoption of the NFU doctrine. Accordingly, this part of the article looks into the reasons that made India to go nuclear and then adopt a NFU stance.

- **Emergence of India as a Nuclear Power.** India, which always believed in a nuclear weapons free world, the decision to weaponise was not out of political considerations or national prestige. The only touchstone that guided it was national security”.<sup>9</sup> China went nuclear in 1964 and soon the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) created a divide between the ‘haves and have nots’. During the Bangladesh War (1971), coercive diplomacy showcased by US wherein they moved its Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal, heightened India’s sense of vulnerability. Though India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974, it sought to use the technology for peaceful purposes, however it was denied access to key technology and fissile material through NPT. Any hopes of India being granted the NWS status was dashed by the unlimited extension of NPT in 1995 and the adoption of CTBT by the UN General Assembly in 1996. As it was left with no option but to stand up for its own security interests, India went in for nuclear tests in May 1998. As these tests were not directed against any country therefore, Indian nuclear doctrine of NFU was marked by a ‘sense of responsibility’ and ‘restraint’ which is born from strength and an assurance of action.

## Ideological Foundations

It can be debated that India's unambiguous NFU policy is imbued by the 'Non Violence' outlook of first generation of Indian leaders. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were two such prominent figures whose influence on Indian nuclear policy are discussed below :

- **Ahimsa Ideals vs Atomic Bombs.** Mahatma Gandhi was the world's leading advocate of non-violence. He was not only a keen supporter of substituting non-violent resistance for war, but also a sharp critic of the nuclear bomb. In 1947 he argued— "He who invented the atom bomb has created the gravest sin in the world of science. The only weapon that can save the world is non-violence. You cannot successfully fight them (atomic bombs) with their own weapons, after all you cannot go beyond the atom bomb".<sup>10</sup> Post-independence such 'Gandhian' abhorrence to nuclear bombs shaped the set of national values wherein India unequivocally rejected the idea of achieving peace through atomic bombs.
- **Political Practicality on Atomic Bomb.** On nuclear weapons, Jawaharlal Nehru proved to be both an idealist and a pragmatist. While he was not in favour of the bomb, he believed that 'when India called for a nuclear-free world, it must do so from a position of strength'. Driven by his convictions in 1958 he cleared a project to recover bombgrade Plutonium from CIRUS (the research reactor built with Canadian help). In 1962, when he learnt about Chinese capability to test their first atomic device, he suggested to speed up India's capability for a peaceful nuclear device'.<sup>11</sup> This Nehruvian approach seems to have laid down the foundation of India's nuclear policy in years to come.

## NFU Policy : Contemporary Relevance

Apart from the ideological beliefs, following contemporary considerations provided anchorage to Indian NFU doctrine:

- **Missing Need: 'First Use' Policy.** Post the Pokhran tests, during the deliberation on India's Nuclear Doctrine, apparently majority of strategist reached a conclusion that, since India faced no existential threats, therefore, it had little need to use nuclear weapons first. This standpoint is still firmly held by a section of academicians and strategists in India.
- **Avoidance: Arms Race.** It was perceived that, despite having two nuclear adversaries, the NFU policy would facilitate India to maintain a relatively small



nuclear stockpile. India's concerns about nuclear stockpiles of China and Pakistan would increase once it had built up adequate deterrence capability. Thus, NFU policy held a promise of amelioration of nuclear arms race in the Asian subcontinent.

- ***Achieve: Regional Deterrence Stability.*** India hoped for a deterrence stability arising out of mutual vulnerability and de-incentivising the temptation of launching a first attack. Thus, through a policy of NFU and negative guarantee of massive retaliation, India hoped to achieve a deterrence stability in the region.

### **Need For Relook : Regional Strategic Deterrence**

India's geostrategic location is uniquely vulnerable as it is flanked by two nuclear armed adversaries. India has continuously inured the sub-conventional war being waged by Pakistan, which maintains an ambiguous first use policy and professes a very low threshold for first use of its TNWs. On the other hand, China the fastest rising nuclear power, is looking to unilaterally alter the status quo along the unsettled India-China border leading to military confrontations. Amidst these developments, some strategic thinkers feel that there is a need to re-look at the overall strategic deterrence balance vis a vis China and Pakistan.

### **New Options for India**

#### ***Strategic Opportunity***

It is evident that the global nuclear order is undergoing a reset and sharper competitiveness among the NWS is expected to be its driving force. In the resultant nationalistic world, the acme is to use the prevailing competition amongst the world powers. In this context, the ongoing US–China rivalry provides a unique leverage for India to seek strategic gains in terms of acquisition of niche technologies and securing a legitimate seat on the nuclear high table —the NWS status in NPT.

#### ***Options : Nuclear Deterrence***

From the discussion above, it is evident that India may need to shed its ideological baggage and temptations of past policy constructs. Our thinking and attitude towards national power constructs may need a review. India needs to de-couple its nuclear policy to counter the unique deterrence situation it faces from its principal adversaries. Same are discussed below:

- ***Dissuasive Deterrence: China.*** Force asymmetry in India-China context favours China and hence it is in the Indian interest to develop a 'dissuasive nuclear deterrence'. To develop such a dissuasive nuclear deterrence, India will have to adopt a two pronged approach as follows:
  - **Policy Intervention: Conditional First Use.** Adopt a 'Conditional First Use', nuclear policy which would permit India to launch its counter value nuclear strikes if the casus-belli of Indian Redlines are crossed.
  - **Capability Development: Pre-emptive Strike.** India should develop a potent and survivable counter value capability against China. In this regard, it must be noted that "holding the enemy's population centres as Intact Hostages can guarantee survival of own population centers".<sup>12</sup> A fleet of Nuclear Powered Ballistic Missile Carrying Submarines (SSBNs) (armed with 1,500 Km range K4 SLBMs) and the MIRVed Agni-5 series of missiles would provide India with such capabilities.
- ***Punitive Deterrence: Pakistan.*** With vastly superior military forces, India needs to achieve a flexible 'punitive deterrence' against Pakistan and dominate the escalation matrix. The punitive deterrence against Pakistan can be achieved by the following measures:
  - **Policy Intervention: Reciprocal NFU.** India should offer NFU to Pakistan only on reciprocal basis, failing which it should 'reserve the Right to Use' nuclear weapons. This will introduce the much needed ambiguity of Indian response in a crisis situation, while ameliorating Pakistan's perceived existential threat.
  - **Capability Development: Flexible Retaliation.** Developing and fielding of pre-emptive counter force capability in terms of TNWs with deployment of dual use MRBMs (PRITHVI series), IRBMs (AGNI series) and Air launched cruise missiles will facilitate India to dominate the escalation matrix vis a vis Pakistan.

## Conclusion

Presently, India faces a dual threat from its adversarial nuclear armed neighbours. The threats emerging from China and Pakistan are unique and inherently different, thus demanding a 'custom made approach' towards ameliorating the individual threats. Hence, there is a need for India to de-couple its nuclear policies; while maintaining an





unconditional NFU stance towards Non NWS, a 'reciprocal NFU stance with Pakistan' and avant-garde 'conditional First Use stance with China' may augur well in the present security paradigm.

India also needs to create capabilities to insert multiple rungs in the escalation matrix between— sub conventional operations and an all-out nuclear war. Recent events have demonstrated that, in conventional operation domain, controlled retaliatory punitive strikes by Special Forces or by Air are effective as such additional rungs. Similarly, in nuclear weapons domain, India should insert rungs between 'No First Use' and a 'Massive Retaliation'. Hence, pre-emptive counter force strikes under imminent threat and flexible assured retaliation options should be developed in the form of SSBNs and dual use missile force.

## End Notes

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