

The Enduring Hypocrisy of Nuclear No First Use

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In realist paradigm of International relations, one shall not solely trust the words of another state when it is a matter of a threat to national security. States can abrogate even a mutual pact when it is conflicting with their national interests. For instance, in December 1940, several sources warned Stalin about the imminent threat of a Nazi invasion, but he remained oblivious and assumed that Hitler would abide by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.

Keeping this in mind, how one can believe that a state having nuclear weapons will keep its words not to use these weapons in the time of crises? Indian's pledge of No First Use (NFU) must be seen in the same limelight.

Since the inception of nuclear thinking in South Asia, Pakistan always questions the credibility about Indian nuclear doctrine and in recent years, there is a debate emerging within India to rethink the policy of NFU. BJP let the cat out of the bag by questioning NFU in its 2014 election manifesto and suggested the need to revise the nuclear doctrine because "*the strategic gains acquired by India during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime on the nuclear programme have been frittered away by the Congress.*"[i] Then after 2 years of silence on the subjected former defence minister Manohar Parrikar Stirred up a hullabaloo and challenged the pledge of NFU. Parrikar said, "*Why a lot of people say that India has No First Use policy. Why should I bind myself to a...? I should say I am a responsible nuclear power and I will not use it irresponsibly.*"[ii]

Most Recently, Vipin Narang a nuclear strategist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said that India would preempt Pakistan's first use doctrine and the preemptive first strike will aim for counterforce targets. He strengthens his argument by referring a book of Shivshankar Menon, who was National Security Adviser to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.[iii] Whereas, Menon in

an interview with Ajai Shukla said “*India’s nuclear doctrine has far greater flexibility than it gets credit for*”.[iv]

The revelations of Menon and Narang do not come as a surprise to Pakistan academic circles. Dr Mansoor Ahmed, postdoctoral Research fellow at Belfer Center of Harvard Kennedy School, already in June 2016 pointed out the transformation in New Delhi nuclear doctrinal thinking. He linked specific pattern of India’s force modernization with India willingness to preempt Pakistan’s tactical first use by counterforce strategy. Mansoor deliberated the developing tendencies in India strategic thinking and branded Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons TNWs as a force multiplier for India to rethink its dubious NFU and comprise flexible response options in its nuclear strategy.[v]

Dubious History of Indian Bomb

India always has had a perplexing association with nuclear weapons. Since 1947, the leaders of India especially Jawaharlal Nehru, was reluctant to pursue nuclear weapons and supported the cause of nuclear disarmament.[vi] Despite this stringent stance, on 18 May 1974, India conducted its first nuclear explosion with the code name “Smiling Buddha”.[vii] After this test, India marched towards an openly declared and operational nuclear capability and finally, on 14 May 1998 India tested five nuclear devices under code name “Operation Shakti”.[viii]

In a Statement to the parliament regarding Operation Shakti on May 27, 1998, former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee categorized India as a responsible nuclear weapon power with the objective to use these weapons against aggressions from any country. He subjected these weapons for self-defence and displayed intend to not get involved in any arms race.[ix] Later, in December 1998, PM again addressed the parliament to elaborate some significant facets of country’s nuclear policy and formally *announced a policy of No first use and non-use against non-nuclear weapon state*. He added that *India is not going to enter into any arms race with any country. India nuclear policy will be a minimum credible deterrent, which will safeguard India's security, the security of one-sixth of humanity, now and into the future.*”[x]

Foreign Minister of Vajpayee government Jaswant Singh in an interview clarified the concept of a minimum credible deterrent. He said that the word minimum in defining credible deterrence is not constant in terms of physical calculation. This type of policy approach will always be dictated by determining security environment, in the context of emerging threats. Therefore, minimum demand will be reassessed and altered according to needs of the security establishment. The only principle to determine the policy regarding nuclear weapons is “national interests.”[xi]

In 1999, the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) was the group responsible for creating the Indian nuclear policy generated a doctrine. This group was comprised of non-governmental experts. The government of India then declared the recommendations given by experts as an unofficial doctrine. The advisory board recommended credible minimum nuclear deterrence and adhered a policy of NFU. The drafted report had legitimated a reserved right of using nuclear weapons against those non-nuclear weapons state allied to adversaries containing nukes. Meanwhile, the report depicts that, “*India will not resort to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against States which do not possess nuclear weapons, or are not aligned with nuclear weapon powers.*”[xii] The angle of using nukes against non-nuclear states was a close copy of concept related to negative security assurances of U.S. presented in the 1980s.[xiii]

In December 2002, the NSAB was praising a comprehensive desertion of NFU by New Delhi.[xiv] However, in January 2003 the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) had reviewed India’s nuclear

doctrine with respect to operational arrangements. The CCS recommended credible minimum deterrent and allowed NFU posture. Whereas, the committee explicitly stated that India would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states unless a major biological or chemical weapons attack took place against Indian forces anywhere will invoke a retaliating with nuclear weapons.[xv]

A critical analysis of 2003 CCS recommendations reveals numbers of important shifts in India's nuclear policy. First, there was a major swing from strict minimum posture to a more flexible approach of credible nuclear deterrence. Including the word "credible" in deterrence posture means that India in future will review its nuclear arsenal size accordingly to the strategic environment and postures of India's nuclear neighbours. Second, India claims of following a strict unconditional NFU policy fell apart when NSAB allowed First Use of nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear weapon country who are not aligned with a country possessing nuclear weapons. Third, alteration in India's nuclear policy was the clear stance to use nuclear weapons first in response to biological or chemical weapons attack.[xvi]

First Use *versus* No First Use

A nuclear doctrine defines a specific framework for a country that entails a set of contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons in harmony with the changed strategic environment, both internationally and regionally.[xvii] In the broader context, a nuclear doctrine could be separated into two main categories "the first use" and "NFU" of the nuclear arsenal, in order to guarantee the existence and augmentation of credible deterrence. Although NFU comprises a persuaded instinctive moral appeal, Pakistan is unconvinced to this type of nuclear policy thinking. All other nuclear nations, with the exception of India and China, has a policy of first use of nuclear weapons as a reaction to any crisis or any misadventure against their sovereignty.

The major difference of nuclear doctrines between India and Pakistan can be quantified by answering one question; how these rivals will use nuclear weapons whenever a crisis emerge? Pakistan corresponded with the policy of using nuclear weapons first. Whereas India responded this question with NFU pledge.

Utilizing nuclear arsenals to compensate with conventional asymmetry is not something new and it has been obvious with policies of many nuclear weapons states. Using nuclear weapons first to balance conventional asymmetry was a long-standing nuclear policy of NATO amid the Cold War.[xviii] When USSR disintegrated and with inferior conventional forces, Russia emerged on the world map; Moscow expressly renounced the NFU promise guaranteed by the USSR.[xix] Whereas, France holds a strategy of calculated ambiguity with respect to the first use of nuclear weapons.[xx] The more accurate instance of using nuclear weapons to offset the misbalance in conventional strength is Pakistan and it took the path similar to NATO, Russia and France.

Islamabad seems to view its strategic weapons as a balance to India's huge conventional gains. Whereas, even Israel may fall into the classification of using nuclear weapons to counter conventional superiority of rival states. Despite the fact that Israel still not in a position to categories as an inferior state compared to its neighbours in the military sense, but it is encompassed by threatening states who are much bigger and possibly more intense, particularly in the event of alliance formation against Tel Aviv.[xxi]

Hypothetically, the first use of nuclear weapons will probably prompt an uncontrolled escalation of events to the extent that rivals could decimate each other. Notwithstanding the will to employ

nuclear weapons 'first' can be used as a deterrent against conventional and nuclear aggressions from a hostile state. It is very difficult to develop a proportional conventional symmetry to compete with a rival, who has larger resources to feed its conventional forces; in this sense, the will of early utilization of nuclear weapons is a compensation to inferior conventional forces.[xxii]

The threat of using nuclear weapons cannot be simply eradicated by a declared policy of NFU. However, the uncertainty and trust deficit related to NFU would perhaps have some deleterious impact on deterrence. While NFU has an assured innate fascination for strategists, it is a flawed idea. First, nuclear deterrence can only be established when there is a considerable threat of nuclear escalation during any crisis. Second, NFU is a dangerous deception and there is no assurance that even a country that has given such a pledge will not use nuclear weapons in a crisis. For instance, the Soviet Union in June 1982, had taken a unilateral pledge for not relying on the first use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the Warsaw pacts records related to military accords fell into German hands clearly demonstrate that Russians were at the onset of their operation plans in using nuclear and chemical weapons against Germany.[xxiii] Similarly, Barkha Dutt in her book revealed that despite NFU, India had been threatening Pakistan with the use of nuclear weapons during Kargil conflict.[xxiv]

Even many who considered the first use of nuclear weapons as unwise and unnecessary by any state still oppose the NFU's commitment to the grounds that it would reduce enemy's uncertainties. For example, Seth Corpe, argues against the dependence of nuclear weapons or the use of it, however, asserts that U.S. should not rule out the use of nuclear weapons altogether. Uncertainty about U.S. nuclear retaliation still forces an adversary to ruminate seriously and this argument has some merit.[xxv]

Deterrence is psychological approach and envisioning threat of First Use as a nuclear warfighting doctrine is an effort to oversimplify the situation. Whereas, the signalling to use nuclear weapons first will certainly demotivate a rival to initiate a conventional attack. Critical analysis of historical conflicts manifested that nuclear weapons have no practical utility and these weapons thwarted many conventional wars and nuclear attacks.[xxvi] In this context former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Larry Welch adeptly summed up that "*I would argue that we have used the nuclear forces every second of every day for 50 years.*"[xxvii]

Conclusion

There is a constant debate persists within India to depart from the strict nuclear NFU policy and to adopt a doctrine that comprises the obvious threat of first use, especially to address the asymmetry with China and for countering Pakistani TNWs. There was a pressure building up on Indian government since 2002 to reject the assurance of NFU. The board, headed by C V Ranganathan, recommended in 2002 "*India must consider withdrawing from this commitment as the other nuclear weapons' states have not accepted this policy.*"[xxviii] If India reconsiders its nuclear posture then this will not be the first time that a state altered its nuclear doctrine. For instance, two nuclear states Russia (in the 1990s) and India (in 2003), have already changed their NFU doctrinal proposal as compared to their initial policy position regarding nuclear weapons.[xxix]

The idea to exploit nuclear weapons as a deterrent against conventional attack is the more honest one than the hypocrisy of NFU pledge. The NFU is merely a pretext to portray an image of responsible nuclear state since no state actually wants to start a nuclear war. No matter how one

will elaborate this concept, under a "no-first-use" commitment, the deterrence will be effective when a state will admit that the use of nuclear weapons is indispensable be it a second strike.

In near future, this is highly possible that India vacates its pledge of NFU against Pakistan and China. In spite of India's pledge of NFU, Indian domestic politics and changing strategic dynamics are contemplating an alarming change in the strategic thinking of India to shift its approach towards NFU. Whereas, Pakistan's nuclear weapons policy, in spite of any claim tossed by its authorities, will remain intricately associated with India's strategic thinking. Therefore, any alteration in India military or nuclear posture will directly effect on Pakistan security doctrine.

NOTES

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