

Should India tinker with its 'No First Use policy'?

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"There is no reason for India to change its policy, which is retaliation and not initiation"

Last week, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that the future of India's 'No First Use' (NFU) policy on nuclear weapons depended on "circumstances". Mr. Singh's statement has raised apprehensions on the likely revision of India's NFU policy and nuclear doctrine. In a conversation moderated by Dinakar Peri, Rajesh Rajagopalan and Manpreet Sethi address these concerns.

Rajesh Rajagopalan is Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Manpreet Sethi is a Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies

Excerpts:

What does the Defence Minister's statement mean, and does it indicate a likely change in India's NFU policy and nuclear doctrine?

Rajesh Rajagopalan: I am not sure if it is really a revision of India's NFU policy because all he said was that in future the policy might change. That has always been the case. The doctrine is only valid for as long as the government says it is valid. It would be foolish to suggest that doctrines cannot change or that they will hold for all times and under all circumstances. All he was suggesting was that we cannot guarantee that the doctrine will hold for all times.

This is possibly a signal to Pakistan that it should not take India's restraint for granted for all times to come, but I think even that would possibly be an exaggerated reading of the statement. I think Rajnath Singh's statement is somewhat different from former Union Minister Manohar Parrikar's statement. He had said at a book launch that he doesn't understand why we have to wait until we hit back. That was a lot more problematic even though it was clarified subsequently that his statement was his personal view rather than the government's policy. I don't see Mr. Singh's statement as signifying a change in the doctrine. And obviously if we did change the NFU policy, that would not be particularly useful.

This is not the first time a Minister or senior functionary has made such a statement. There have been periodic debates on a revision of India's stand, especially on the NFU policy, in strategic circles. Revision of the NFU policy was also in the BJP's manifesto in 2014, though it wasn't there in its 2019 manifesto. Is all this indicative of a change at some point?

Manpreet Sethi: I quite agree with how Professor Rajagopalan has interpreted Mr. Singh's statement. I think it is a very normal statement. Policy adjustments get made as situations change. I don't see anything in the statement that is indicative of any desire for change as of now. As regards the BJP manifesto that you mentioned, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear that there was not going to be any revision. Individual voices, most of whom are retired officials who occupied positions of power, have brought up this issue of revision of NFU, but they did not mention any revision of NFU when they were in those positions. Late last year, on the occasion of the announcement of the first deterrence patrol of India's ballistic missile nuclear submarine INS Arihant, the Prime Minister once again reiterated that the basic tenet of India's nuclear doctrine will be NFU. As far as I can see, there is no change in the doctrine on the cards. But having said that, there are always the 'Nuclearazzi', who are out with their microscopes to look at everything that has been said and who read more into statements. I think that's what is happening in the case of India's NFU. I do believe it's a good policy and there's no reason for the country to change it.

In the last few years, India's conventional posture has undergone a major shift. This was evident in the 2016 surgical strikes and this year's Balakot airstrike. It also disproved the old belief that under a nuclear overhang, the room for conventional manoeuvre is closed. In that context, isn't stability in the nuclear realm better for India so that there is room in the conventional domain?

RR: Absolutely. I mean obviously we want stability in the nuclear front, but I don't think that stability was under threat. Pakistan repeatedly raises this bogey of nuclear escalation every time it engages in some action in terms of sending terrorists across. But that is a way of constraining India's response, as a way of preventing India from responding militarily to those kinds of attacks. The idea is that if you raise the issue, if you bring in nuclear escalation as a threat, it will constrain India's response. It is always a false expectation, a false argument, because there is no direct link between conventional escalation and nuclear escalation.

In Kargil, for example, when we started using air power to dislodge Pakistan air forces from mountain heights, initially Pakistan complained about escalation. It said this could lead to nuclear escalation. But pretty soon it was clear that there was no such thing. Similarly, during the 2016 surgical strikes, Pakistan again complained about the possibility of escalation. But in each of these cases we have not seen any escalation. There are several layers in between, and those layers are where Pakistan has benefited because it can't really escalate to something like Balakot or to surgical strikes.

So, yes, we want nuclear stability and that nuclear stability exists. It is just an exaggeration by Pakistan that nuclear stability is always under threat and anything we do will put it under immense strain.

Of late, we have repeatedly shown that we can take action without it escalating anywhere close to the nuclear level.

Talking about the escalation matrix, the strategic ambiguity can lead to a response from Pakistan and then in turn from China, India's two nuclear adversaries. Pakistan has been trying to put its nuclear weapons at sea. The U.S. has walked out of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty. How will these developments impact the region?

MS: First of all, I don't think any ambiguity has been brought into India's doctrine as of now. I think India is very clear on its NFU policy.

On the likely Pakistan reaction, Pakistan is working on what it calls the full spectrum deterrence capability. So, in terms of the arsenal build-up, I don't think there is going to be any major change except that it will likely show urgency or justification for the large stockpile build-up that it is anyway engaged in. More likely, removal of NFU will put India in a problematic situation because for a credible 'first use' you have to build different kinds of capabilities which will mean going on a different trajectory. So, it is most likely that India will get pulled into an arms race if it was to remove the NFU.

In terms of China's reaction, I don't see any material changes happening in response to India's capability build-up. In any case, it has a lead on nuclear and delivery systems. It will definitely use the opportunity to denigrate India's status as a responsible nuclear power. So, India's claim to be a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council will come under strain as a result of that.

Frankly, as far as the response of the rest of the world is concerned, we are already in a situation where arms control is crumbling: the U.S.'s nuclear posture review is talking about limited nuclear war once again. The rest of the world will not care much about this change, except at the rhetoric level where there will be criticism of what is going on. So, my concern is not so much the rest of the world's response to change in NFU, but what it will be for India itself in terms of investment in financial and technological capabilities to make a first use credible. After all, it's not just a question of dropping the 'No' from NFU, it is a matter of making the first use credible and that is not an easy proposition. There is no chance that India has of carrying out in the first strike a disarming or decapitating strike for the kinds of adversaries that we have and therefore we will be sucking ourselves into an arms race if we were to go for a first use doctrine.

Pakistan has been trying to diversify its nuclear arsenal for many years now and has been trying to bridge the gap between conventional and nuclear. I am referring to attempts to put nuclear warheads on conventional submarines following India's nuclear triad taking shape. Does this blur the line between conventional and nuclear and create new risks?

RR: Yes, there is a problem when you use dual-use delivery vehicles and weapons systems. This is the problem we have faced in the past. Say Pakistan is holding its nuclear weapons in some airbase. We may be constrained from attacking that airbase because we wouldn't want Pakistan to mistake a conventional attack on an airbase as an attack on its nuclear weapons. So, whenever you have dual-use weapons, there is a problem. There is a problem when both may misunderstand a particular platform, base or a submarine as containing nuclear weapons. One may be constrained from attacking that because we don't want to give the impression that we are going after their nuclear weapons. On the other hand, it is an even bigger problem when Pakistan uses these dual-use systems. If a conventional missile or a short-range missile is launched at us, we wouldn't know whether it is a conventional missile or a nuclear missile and therefore it is possible that one may mistake it as an incoming nuclear attack. Even our own armoury has both nuclear and conventional warheads, which is generally bad practice.

In 2013, after Pakistan introduced tactical nuclear weapons or battlefield nuclear weapons, India clarified that it will not distinguish between strategic and tactical nuclear warheads and the doctrine of massive retaliation will apply. Following the recent blurring of lines with dual-use technologies, does the nuclear doctrine as it is still hold?

RR: I don't think that makes a difference. I think whatever the Indian position, any attack would be considered a nuclear attack even if it is a tactical nuclear weapon that is used against Indian forces or Indian territory. It will be considered a full-scale nuclear attack. I think that the response to a tactical nuclear weapons attack, especially on Indian forces inside Pakistani territory, will make it difficult for India to justify a full-scale massive retaliation that the Indian doctrine suggests. But the Indian doctrine is also sufficiently flexible. Massive retaliation is one of the options it has in case of a nuclear attack. India can decide to use, for instance, another smaller nuclear warhead in retaliation or a limited nuclear strike. So, it doesn't mean the doctrine itself has to change in response to that. All the doctrine says as of now is, we will not be the first to attack and we will only retaliate. Our posture and doctrine are essentially retaliation only. We will not initiate.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements -

1. In 1957, India established its first Atomic Research Center.
2. India declared its Nuclear Doctrine in 2003.
3. According to the Nuclear Doctrine the decision of the use of Nuclear weapon could only be taken by the Prime Minister or a person nominated by him.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) All of the above
- (d) None of the above

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. Observing the global scenario, "No First Use Policy" adopted by India regarding the use of Nuclear weapons is how much relevant at present? Discuss.

(250Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 22 Aug. is 1 (d)