

Counterforce Temptations in South Asia

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Abstract

India's 'No First Use' (NFU) commitment enunciated in its 2003 nuclear doctrine was not 'unconditional,' and retains the option of retaliation with nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack. The recent statements by India's senior leadership questioning the rationale of maintaining an NFU posture has led many international observers to conclude that India may have formally given up its NFU posture and could be contemplating the option of pre-emptive counterforce strikes against its principal adversary, Pakistan. The doctrinal ambiguities together with the ongoing Indian military modernization, which includes the acquisition of Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system; operationalization of second-strike capability and the recent testing of a Hypersonic Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV) has further reinforced the perception that India could be developing nuclear as well as conventional counterforce options to deter and prevent Pakistan from the early deployment or use of short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), and create space for India's limited war fighting doctrines of Cold Start or Pro-Active Operations (PAOs). These developments are likely to push the region towards

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*another cycle of 'instability-stability pendulum'²
with serious consequences for regional as well as
global stability.*

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Introduction

India with its military spending of over US \$70 billion³ enjoys significant quantitative and qualitative edge over Pakistan but has not been able to fully exploit this advantage. The overt nuclearization of South Asia in 1998, further compounded India's dilemma as it precluded the possibility of a war between the two nuclear armed adversaries. The two major military crises of 1999 and 2001-02 that took place immediately after both countries had formally declared themselves nuclear weapon states, that led to a stalemate, further reinforced the Cold War lesson that nuclear armed states generally do not go to war with each other. This realization helped start a Composite Dialogue process in 2004 with both countries agreeing in their joint statement that the "nuclear capabilities of each other constitute a factor of stability."⁴

Interestingly, while this political consensus was being developed at the leadership level, the Indian military introduced a new war fighting doctrine that could help provide an option of

² "Keynote address by Lt Gen (Retd) Khalid Kidwai," the Seventh IISS-CISS Workshop on South Asian Strategic Stability: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control, IISS London, February 6, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/events/2020/02/7th-iiss-and-ciiss-south-asian-strategic-stability-workshop>, accessed on October 11, 2020.

³ SIPRI, *SIPRI Year Book-2020* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), accessed October 11, 2020 <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largest-annual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion>.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, *Joint statement, India-Pakistan Expert-Level Talks on Nuclear CBMs*. June 20, 2004, accessed November 11, 2020 http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/26_ea_india.pdf?_id=1316627913.