

The Diminishing Credibility of Indian “No First Use” Policy

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Abstract

India's nuclear policy of NFU, with conditions attached, has indicated explicitly that New Delhi seeks the nuclear option at lower escalation levels. NFU pledge is very difficult to enforce during a military crisis. Therefore, the BJP government is exploring a policy option where India can maintain the formality of a NFU doctrine but carry on with preparations for first use capacity. BJP's domestic political consolidation and future international developments will subsidize any change in nuclear doctrine. India's nuclear policy shift will be influenced by the continuous strengthening of its nuclear missile forces. Any future policy shift can be judged through procurement, deployment, and command and control structure configuration. The transition in Indian employment posture towards developing usable nuclear weapons as the first strike further reduces the credibility of its declared NFU policy. Any country's declaratory nuclear doctrine is beneficial only if it is credible. India's quest for preemptive counterforce strikes could lead to deterrence instability. India is expanding its nuclear weapons programme under the guise of nuclear mainstreaming. While branding India as a responsible nuclear power, the professed NFU has offered an excuse to discourage foreign criticism

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and scrutiny of India's nuclear expansion. Notwithstanding, the Indian shift from its NFU posture will not impact global powers' behaviour towards New Delhi concerning arrangements like MTCR, NSG, and Australia Group.

Keywords: Indian Nuclear Doctrine, No First Use, Preemptive Counterforce Strike, Nonproliferation, NSG, MTCR

Introduction

The traditional outlook of Indian nuclear deliberations and debates revolves around the No First Use (NFU) policy, which has been internationally recognized as the core component of India's formal nuclear strategy. The approved nuclear policy of India incorporates an NFU determination with conditionality, which several Indian officials have already underlined on many occasions.² The conventional wisdom guides us that India's policy of NFU has always been conditional and the Indian nuclear doctrine explicitly states that India retains the choice of retaliating with nuclear weapons to a biological or chemical attack on it or its forces anywhere. The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) 2003 unequivocally authenticated "Credible Minimum Deterrence" (CMD) as a cornerstone to adopting authentic operational arrangements.³ The declared nuclear doctrine of India does not express evidently what "credible" and "minimum" actually imply.

² Kumar Sundaram and M. V. Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol.1, no. 1 (2 January 2018), 152–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1438737>.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, "The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Operationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine," (Government of India, 4 January 2003), Available at:https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/20131/The_Cabinet_Committee_on_Security_Reviews_operationalization_of_Indias_Nuclear_Doctrine+Report+of+National+Security+Advisory+Board+on+Indian+Nuclear+Doctrine.(Accessed on November 14, 2021).

In the contemporary strategic scenario of South Asia, critical insight is needed into Indian nuclear doctrine while discussing the ambiguity shrouded around the policy of NFU. Analysts are contemplating that senior policymakers' remarks and approaches in New Delhi suggest that India has now moved towards a nuclear position that Pakistan can no longer consider minimal.⁴ There are numerous explanations to consider that credible minimum deterrence may be New Delhi's declaratory doctrine, but the deterrence signaling of operational nuclear posture differs from India's official nuclear doctrine against Pakistan and China.⁵ A sufficient ambiguity exists in nuclear doctrine because the Indian government used broader terms like "massive retaliation" and "unacceptable damage" without elaborating on how these may be executed. India has not attained the prerequisites (for instance, thermonuclear weapons), which are an essential aspect of operationalizing and materializing the strategy of "massive retaliation."⁶ Emerging debates regarding India's NFU policy suggest that the current Indian government of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is considering revisiting its nuclear doctrine of NFU to Preemptive First Use OR Counter Force Disarming First Use.⁷ This ambiguity and mixed deterrence signaling is creating rough grounds for the credibility of the Indian strategic posture, which will continue to diminish in an environment where the triangular nuclear rivalry between China, India, and Pakistan exacerbates security trilemma.

⁴ Vipin Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.36 (1 August 2013), 143–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2013.825555>.

⁵ Vipin Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture,"

⁶ Umar Hayat Luk, "Strategic Ambiguities in Indian Nuclear Doctrine Implications for Pakistan's security," *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2016), 5–23.

⁷ "India May Abandon Its “no First Use” Nuclear Policy: Expert," *The Economic Times*, 12 July 2018.

Evolution of India's Nuclear Doctrine:

Former PM of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, in his address to the parliament on 27 May 1998, classified India as a rational nuclear power to use these arsenals against provocations from any country. Vajpayee branded nuclear weapons as a force multiplier to achieve self-defence and demonstrated his country's will to not engage in any arms race.⁸ PM again briefed the Parliament in December 1998 to prepare several essential elements of the country's nuclear strategy and officially "*announced a policy of NFU and non-use against the non-nuclear-weapon state.*" He stressed that India would not participate in any arms race or competition with other states. Vajpayee concluded that Indian 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.*"⁹

In a discussion, former Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh of the BJP government addressed the ambiguity related to minimum credible deterrence. Singh elaborated that the minimum terminology while describing credible deterrence cannot be categorized as a constant position in terms of physical measurement. He deliberated that in the backdrop of inconsistent threat perception, the nuclear policy is often decided through calculating changing security dynamics. The "minimum" requirement will therefore be readjusted and modified to meet the needs of the security institution. Singh used the vague term "national interests" as an indicator to decide the strategy concerning nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Feedback from a range of sources is included in the preparation of nuclear doctrine and policy in India. Military routes its

⁸ "Statement to Parliament by Prime Minister Vajpayee," (Government of India, 27 May 1998), Available at: <http://www.acronym.org.uk/old/archive/spind.htm>. (Accessed on November 14, 2021).

⁹ As quoted in Scott D. Sagan, *Inside Nuclear South Asia* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ See Sagan.

input through the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the National Command Authority (NCA), and the "National Security Advisory Board" (NSAB). Civilian institutions like NSAB, MoD, the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCN), and the National Security Council (NSC) remain in the upper tier of decision-making. Finally, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, CCS articulates policy decisions regarding nuclear weapons programme. The most important person in this decision-making process is the National Security Advisor (NSA).¹¹

The first Indian nuclear doctrine was articulated in 1999 by NSAB, founded by the first NSA, Brajesh Mishra. The board was composed of experts from the non-government sphere, i.e., retired bureaucrats, academicians, and professionals from civil society. The Indian government then proclaimed the experts' advice as an unofficial nuclear policy. The consultative board, in its report, suggested the effectiveness of CMD posture and adopted the NFU strategy. The report emphasized that "*India will not resort to the use or threat of nuclear weapons against states that do not possess nuclear weapons or are not aligned with nuclear weapon powers.*" So report legitimized the Indian freedom to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states if they composed any anti-Indian alliance with states with nuclear arsenals.¹² This was the nearest approximation to the idea of "negative security assurances of the U.S." in the 1980s, which was the perspective of utilizing nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states.¹³

¹¹ Rajesh Basrur, '*India's Escalation-Resistant Nuclear Posture*', in *Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option in South Asia* (Washington DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2004), 58.

¹² "Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine," 17 August 1999, Available at: <https://rb.gy/ms6mtb>.

¹³ George Bunn and Roland M. Timerbaev, "Security Assurances to the Non-nuclear-weapon States," *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol.1, no. 1 (1 September 1993), 11–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736709308436519>.

In January 2003, regarding operational arrangements, the CCS updated and reviewed India's nuclear policy. The critical attributes of nuclear doctrine formulated by the Cabinet Committee can be described as 1) Operational preparations will be articulated as per requirements of CMD; 2) NFU will guide the actual retaliatory use of nuclear weapons during a crisis; 3) The country who employ the first use of nuclear weapons will bear "unacceptable damage" from "massive retaliation" of Indian nuclear forces; and 4) India reserves the right of using nuclear weapons first *"in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons."*¹⁴

A comprehensive examination of the CCS's guidelines exposes numerous policy shifts compared to the nuclear posture adopted by India in 1999. First, there was an indication of transformation from a strict minimum approach to a more flexible stance of credible minimum deterrence. CCS added the term "credible" in the deterrence posture to ensure that in the future, India will analyze its nuclear capabilities by emerging threats emanating from its nuclear rivals, Pakistan and China. Second, India's attempts to follow a stringent NFU strategy have been undermined because NSAB, while discussing objectives of Indian nukes in article 2, allowed nuclear arsenals to be used first against any non-nuclear weapons state allied with a nuclear weapons state. Third, the robust approach of utilizing nuclear arsenals first in reaction to an invasion by biological or chemical weapons has been altered in India's nuclear strategy.¹⁵

¹⁴ "The Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Perationalization of India's Nuclear Doctrine," *Ministry of External Affairs*, January 4, 2004, Available at: https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/20131/The_Cabinet_Committee_on_Security_Reviews_perationalization_of_Indias_Nuclear_Doctrine+Report+of+National+Security+Advisory+Board+on+Indian+Nuclear+Doctrine . (Accessed on November 14, 2021).

¹⁵ Sagan, *Inside Nuclear South Asia*, 246–48.

India’s Political Rhetoric around Nuclear Doctrine

Since the inception of its nuclear doctrine, the Indian government has been claiming that nuclear arms are purely for deterrence and retaliatory purposes. The narrative that India will only use nuclear weapons as a deterrence tool has been smashed in the light of the ongoing attacks on the NFU policy by the BJP's government. In its 2014 election manifesto, the BJP government challenged NFU. The nuclear doctrine would be revamped because *"the strategic gains acquired by India during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime on the nuclear programme have been frittered away by the Congress."*¹⁶ This discussion was not new in BJP's power corridors because previously,, Jaswant Singh in 2011 had already demanded to revisit NFU pledge.¹⁷ After BJP's comprehensive victory in the 2014 election, it was evident that the Modi government would create some stirs regarding the overall nuclear strategy.

The controversy regarding NFU was further reinforced in 2016 by the Former defence Minister of India, Manohar Parrikar. Parrikar suggested that India state that it should "responsibly" by utilizing its nuclear weapons rather than emphasizing the NFU pledge. *"Why do many people say that India is for 'not first use...why should I bind myself? I should say I am a responsible nuclear power, and I will not use it irresponsibly,"* he said.¹⁸ After Parrikar’s comments, it has almost become a norm for the Indian defence ministry to contest the country's

¹⁶ "Will Revise India’s “no First Use” Nuclear Policy, Says BJP," *India TV*, April 8, 2014, Available at: <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/will-revise-india-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-says-bjp-35247.html>. (Accessed on November 14, 2021).

¹⁷ "Jaswant for Review of No-First-Use Nuke Policy," *outlook*, March 15, 2011, Available at: <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/jaswant-for-review-of-no-first-use-nuke-policy/715202>. (Accessed on November 14, 2021).

¹⁸ "India Should Not Bind Itself to a “No-First-Use Nuclear Policy”," *Scroll*, November 10, 2016, Available at: <http://scroll.in/latest/821251/india-should-not-bind-itself-to-a-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-says-manohar-parrikar>. (Accessed on November 24, 2021).

nuclear doctrine publicly. Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh has recently indicated that India's policy regarding nuclear weapons may change depending on the shifting strategic environment.¹⁹

India has indicated explicitly that it retains the nuclear option at lower levels of escalation.²⁰ India may launch a nuclear attack to address a threat below its threshold level – an attack on its very existence.²¹ This implies a constant debate within India that government should be flexible regarding its nuclear posture, and it should not confine itself to only a response level against a nuclear attack, but it should also broaden the canvas of threat perception. This argument can be strengthened by referring to a book, *“Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy (Geopolitics in the 21st Century)”* by Shivshankar Menon, who was NSA to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Menon said in an interview with Ajai Shukla: *“India’s nuclear doctrine has far greater flexibility than it gets credit for.”*²² Menon had previously discredited Indian nuclear doctrine in 2010 and inferred that NFU is only directed towards non-nuclear weapons states.²³ These

¹⁹ Indrani Bagchi, “No First Use’ of Nukes Policy Is Open to Review,” *The Times of India*, August 17, 2019, Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/no-first-use-of-nukes-policy-is-open-to-review-rajnath/articleshow/70707921.cms>. (Accessed on November 24, 2021).

²⁰ SAV Editorial Staff, “Hot Takes: Potential Indian Nuclear First Use?,” *South Asian Voices*, March 20, 2017, Available at: <https://southasianvoices.org/sav-dc-nukefest2017-potential-indian-nuclear-first-use/>. (Accessed on November 24, 2021).

²¹ Karthika Sasikumar, “After Nuclear Midnight: The Impact of a Nuclear War on India and Pakistan,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, no. 4 (4 July 2017), 226–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1338009>.

²² Ajai Shukla, “Will India Nuke Pakistani Cities, or Go for Its Nuclear Arsenal?,” *Business Standard News*, March 20, 2017, Available at: https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/will-india-nuke-pakistani-cities-or-go-for-its-nuclear-arsenal-117031700921_1.html. (Accessed on November 24, 2021).

²³ “Speech by NSA Shri Shivshankar Menon at NDC on “The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, October 21, 2010, Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/798/Speech+by+NSA+Shri+Shivshankar+Menon+at+NDC+on+The+e+Role+of+Force+in+Strategic+Affairs>. (Accessed on November 24, 2021).

debates ensured that the Indian government could not have understood the complete effect of the NFU pledge, and top political leadership was more focused on its instrumental purpose.²⁴

India's debate regarding nuclear doctrine is a consequence of two different factors. **First**, the classical debate regarding the credibility of NFU because a rival nuclear state always has some doubt regarding this so-called idealistic posture. **Second**, the evolution of Indian nuclear forces will ultimately enhance its strategic options.²⁵ The credibility of NFU is a debatable topic within the strategic community of India. Academicians in New Delhi have already highlighted that the pledge of NFU is only applicable to a country that has absolute trust not only in the ability of its nuclear forces that they could bear the first strike effectively but also in the ability to manage a crisis. Another problem with NFU is that this pledge is difficult to enforce during a crisis, especially military. As it is not feasible to build nuclear arms only for the second strike capability, NFU is a mere promise in peacetime that a nation will not have to comply with during a military crisis.²⁶ Therefore, a stated NFU cannot eliminate the possibility of using nuclear arms first. The instability and confidence-based deficiency correlated with the NFU could have detrimental deterrence effects.

It is pertinent to mention the importance of the NSA in the decision-making process to formulate nuclear strategy. The current NSA and Minister of External Affairs are critical advisers to PM Modi on the issues related to foreign policy. These voices within BJP are formulating a strategy for a clever doctrinal shift regarding nuclear weapons. Policy pundits are trying to find a middle ground where India can maintain the formality of an NFU doctrine – to project itself as a

²⁴ Sundaram and Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,"

²⁵ Bruno Tertrais (Deputy Director of Foundation for Strategic Research), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

²⁶ Bharat Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security: The Realist Foundations of Strategy* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2005), 442–43.

'responsible' nuclear power – but carry on with preparations for first use capacity. This domestic political rhetoric around nuclear doctrine with a deliberate injection of ambiguity sends the message to Pakistan from India that 'doesn't think our NFU formal position will necessarily bind us.' Meanwhile, any future change in nuclear doctrine will be subsidized by BJP's domestic political consolidation and future international developments. Notwithstanding, the certain and formal change in India's nuclear doctrine in the near future is highly improbable because it could create adverse effects on Indian soft power related to nuclear weapons when New Delhi is in pursuit of nuclear mainstreaming.²⁷ The Indian doctrine of NFU has never served the desired purpose because Pakistan is skeptical of this nuclear strategy.²⁸ In reality, NFU is a policy of using nuclear weapons tacitly, and it has to be treated as "*merely being a deterrence posture.*"²⁹

The idea of any expected policy change concerning the Indian nuclear weapons is significantly less convincing.³⁰ There are huge incongruities regarding India's contemporary technological incapability to operate a proper counterforce posture, which involves preemption or decapitation. But the incessant strengthening of the Indian nuclear missile forces, in terms of quality and quantity, would change Indian policymakers' opinions regarding the future use of such capabilities. Missile launchers with increased mobility and faster ready-to-launch ability will present Indian planners with new or modified ways of

²⁷ Achin Vanaik (Founding Member of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace (CNDP) of India), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

²⁸ Malik Qasim Mustafa, "India Rethinking of Its No First Use (NFU) Policy: Implications for South Asian Strategic Stability," *Issue Brief Institute of Strategic Studies*, April 6, 2017, Available at: http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Final-Issue_Qasim_dated_06-4-2017.pdf.

²⁹ Ayesha Abbasi, "India's Nuclear Minimalism: Looking Through the Smokescreen," *Islamabad Policy Research Institute*, Vol. XIX, no. 2 (2019), 35–59.

³⁰ Bruno Tertrais, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

deploying and potentially using nuclear weapons.³¹ Some prominent academicians also support the notion of India's nuclear first use as "The combination of more weapons, a greater number of accurate delivery vehicles at a higher state of readiness and responsiveness, precise warheads, Multiple Independently targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs), and a layered ballistic missile defence system allows Indian civilian and military leaders to start thinking about first-strike strategies—or damage-limiting, launch-on-warning strategies—that use nuclear missiles to target an adversary’s nuclear arsenal and then rely on missile defenses to intercept any assets that survive the disarming strike attempt.”³² Previous doctrinal shifts like the draft nuclear doctrine after Operation Shakti, limited war doctrine after 1999, Cold Start after 2002, or Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF) of 2017 were always formulated in haste after some significant strategic event. The pattern of doctrinal shifts has never communicated a clear message, whether the emphasis is primarily one of rhetorical signaling or India is moving away from its declared position. Any future change in nuclear doctrine to permit first use can be judged by analyzing the configuration concerning procurement, deployment, and command and control structure.³³

Credibility Problem with India’s Nuclear Doctrine

Official spokespersons and policy pundits in the Indian government consistently suggest that the NFU pledge should remove its neighbor's fears regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons. There is a contradiction to this assertion, as India itself opposes China's NFU

³¹ Hans Kristensen (Director at Federation of American Scientists), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

³² Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India’s Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, Vol. 43, no. 3 (1 February 2019), 7–52.

³³ Timothy D. Hoyt (Professor of Strategy and Policy at U.S. Naval War College), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

pledge and uses Beijing's nuclear capabilities as a justification for modernizing its nuclear forces.³⁴ Although China has an unconditional NFU declaration, Beijing has been increasingly mentioned by New Delhi as a primary nuclear rival. India is justifying its technological advancement in expanding its missile programme and triad capability to assure a second strike as a counterweight to China's strategic capacity. But these strategic stances and policies of India undermine deterrence and crisis stability proportionately towards Pakistan.³⁵

The Indian nuclear doctrine, owing to its high level of uncertainty, is heavily criticized by both domestic and international analysts. In the Indian nuclear strategy, the ambiguous principles of "unacceptable damage" and "massive retaliation" were put out; however, at the same time, India has accelerated its efforts to acquire triad capabilities even though New Delhi has an official NFU stance.³⁶ Contemporarily, the official discourse within India about arms procurement and military expansion is leading towards optimal first use of nuclear weapons and flexible nuclear response under the pretext of modernization of nuclear forces. New Delhi is preparing grounds to distance itself from the NFU pledge, or at least it is looking for other employment options beyond NFU to provide more strategic choices for the policymakers based on expanded flexibility.³⁷

While it is essential to underscore that NFU triggers credibility complications, there is little clarification in the Indian case on how it could revisit its nuclear doctrine. Therefore, at the macro level, it

³⁴ Sundaram and Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,"

³⁵ Zulfqar Khan and Ahmad Khan, "The Strategic Impasse over India's Doctrinal Restructuring," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, no. 1 (2 January 2016), 139–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1170485>.

³⁶ Khan and Khan.

³⁷ Michael Tkacik, "India Nuclear Weapons: No First Use or No Full Disclosure?," *Defence Studies*, Vol. 17, no. 1 (2 January 2017), 84–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2016.1271721>.

automatically implies that India is looking for "Counter Force Disarming First Use," and India is transforming its nuclear forces accordingly. Although NFU could be the existing declaratory policy of India, the employment policy is in a transition phase.³⁸ India is developing nuclear arsenals, which are far more useable during a conflict. India is contesting its nuclear doctrine by developing a variety of short-range capabilities, which could have significant consequences for a regional arms race.³⁹ From the perspective of the absolute NFU pledge, India is working on modernizing its nuclear forces, which is challenging the idea of using nuclear weapons for second-strike deterrence purposes. Though India still insists that NFU guides its nuclear thinking, the development of usable nuclear weapons as the first strike reduces the credibility of its declared nuclear doctrine.⁴⁰

Contrastingly, there are severe weaknesses regarding the ambiguity shrouded in the concept of massive retaliation, which was first proposed in 1954 by John F. Dulles, former U.S. Secretary of State, as a significant aspect of nuclear deterrence.⁴¹ Massive retaliation in India's context is *“a nuclear strategy that, as a deterrent, conveys to the adversary that the costs of pursuing an objective are much more than the possible gains the adversary could acquire.”* Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary of India, has explained how massive retaliation is interpreted in New Delhi without any proper evidentiary support by the Indian government. Saran identified the massive retaliation as a critical element of India's nuclear posture, and he tried to eliminate any uncertainty over how India was contemplating enormous retaliation. He restated that the Indian nuclear capability is

³⁸ Tkacik.

³⁹ "Prahaar," *Missile Threat*, June 15, 2018, Available at: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/prahaar/>.

⁴⁰ Tkacik, "India Nuclear Weapons,"

⁴¹ History.com Editors, "U.S. Announces Policy of "Massive Retaliation" against Communist Aggressors," *History*, November 13, 2009, Available at: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/dulles-announces-policy-of-massive-retaliation>. (Accessed on November 24, 2021).

designed to inflict unacceptable damage through massive nuclear retaliation, and "any nuclear exchange, once initiated, would swiftly and inexorably escalate to the strategic level." India sees enormous retaliation as a strategy without any flexibility, which requires counter-value targeting like the usage of nuclear weapons against very heavily populated areas.⁴²

Notwithstanding, there is a credibility problem with India's massive retaliatory means. Thermonuclear devices provide essential means for massive retaliation. On 11 May 1998, in Operation Shakti-1, India claims to have tested a thermonuclear weapon. International analysts, however, believe that the Indians overly exaggerated the thermonuclear test's results.⁴³ The scientific community which organized Operation Shakti-1 has established the fact that the project failed as the fusion device "never produced the desired results."⁴⁴ Therefore, India's massive retaliation credibility is highly questionable in any future military crisis. Indian scientists have urged their government to avoid signing the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) to open the door for future thermonuclear tests.⁴⁵ Recently, the US government has initiated a debate to revoke its unilateral moratorium on nuclear weapons testing. India will probably join this bandwagon by resuming its thermonuclear tests.⁴⁶ The Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) have already

⁴² Arka Biswas, "Incredibility of India's Massive Retaliation: An Appraisal on Capability, Cost, and Intention," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 36, no. 5 (20 October 2017), 445–56, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2017.1379837>.

⁴³ Mark Hibbs, "India May Test Again Because H-Bomb Failed, US Believes," *Nuclear Watch*, November 26, 1998, Available at: <http://www.bu.edu/globalbeat/nucwatch/nucwatch112698.html>.

⁴⁴ "Pokhran II Not Fully Successful: Scientist," *The Times of India*, 27 August 2009.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Hasan Ehtisham, "If the Donald Trump Resumes US Nuclear Weapons Testing, India Will Follow," *The National Interest*, June 13, 2020, Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/if-donald-trump-resumes-us-nuclear-weapons-testing-india-will-follow-162736>. (Accessed on December 2, 2021).

shown the preparedness to conduct more nuke tests “at short notice.”⁴⁷

Today, India's strategy is based on a mixed approach toward counter value and counterforce targets responding to nuclear attacks. If India in the near future opts for nuclear war fighting in the sense of decapitation – meaning a comprehensive preemptive attack – then it is exceptionally difficult for India and not fail-proof even for the most advanced nuclear-armed states. The approach of decapitation strikes needs a considerable number of resources and technological advancement, a luxury that is currently unavailable to India. Even Russia and the US have not considered this type of strategy, which involves decapitating an opponent's nuclear forces. India could develop capabilities against Pakistan and China to ensure decapitation strikes in the foreseeable future. A preemptive strike is more accessible, but it relies on identifying the threats that a country tries to preempt. India can target a weapon system to limit the damage before being used.

Nevertheless, a predicament exists regarding the successful implementation of preemptive strikes because a nuclear rival could be left with other nuclear forces to respond with. Preemption can be used for two purposes; to prevent a nuclear attack before an actual attack happens or to launch a decapitation strike against the remaining nuclear forces for damage-limitation. This strategy is highly destabilizing and dangerous because it could provoke rival nuclear countries to switch towards offensive crisis postures. If Indian adversaries operationalized offensive crisis postures to deter preemptive strikes, then New Delhi would be less secure and not more protected in the context of crisis stability. In the near future, India will

⁴⁷ "India Capable Of Nuclear Test At Short Notice: Defence Research Chief," *NDTV*, May 29, 2018, Available at: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-capable-of-nuclear-test-at-short-notice-defence-research-chief-1858949>. (Accessed on December 2, 2021).

not change its NFU pledge, but change could be anticipated in terms of an effort to increase the readiness of its retaliatory posture.⁴⁸

An expansionary Indian modernization of its nuclear forces – particularly those conducted in the context of so-called preemptive strikes – would be detrimental to "minimum deterrence" because enhancing the quality of nuclear weapons has zero utility in a minimal approach. The acquisition of more potent weapons does not lead to deterrence stability because it has a symbolic value. Although Pak-China relations are sometimes projected as a legitimate threat to Indian strategic interests, a two-front nuclear competition is not a very convincing threat. The recent Sino-India face-off in the disputed Galwan Valley of Indian occupied Ladakh has manifested this reality. PM Modi has downplayed the clash that killed 20 Indian soldiers and said that "*nobody has intruded into our border, neither is anybody there now nor have our posts been captured.*"⁴⁹ India has deployed more than eighty percent of conventional/unconventional resources against Pakistan. It will avoid every circumstance that leads to a split of its military might on two borders. The Indian government will always use a policy of appeasement against China while focusing its military strength against Pakistan. New Delhi is just using a two-front war mantra to gradually enhance the quality and quantity of its armed forces, which is not relevant to the concept of minimum deterrence. There is a minimum relevance of asymmetry in terms of quality and quantity of nuclear forces while discussing the idea of "minimum deterrence." In a nuclear paradigm, the utility of conventional forces eventually diminishes as military conflict at maximum scale becomes less likely.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Hans Kristensen, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁴⁹ "Modi Says There Was No Border Intrusion in Deadly Clash with China," *The Express Tribune*, June 19, 2020, Available at: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/2246378/3-modi-says-no-border-intrusion-deadly-clash-china>. (Accessed on December 2, 2021).

⁵⁰ Basrur, "India's Escalation-Resistant Nuclear Posture,"

The declaratory policy of any country concerning nuclear weapons is only useful when it is credible. Since Indian opponents (Pakistan and China) are not convinced of the New Delhi NFU pledge, any improvements in declaratory policy are not significant regarding deterrence. However, a change that provides legitimate threat perceptions and acceptable public means to develop counterforce capabilities has strategic significance, which could be destabilizing.⁵¹ Due to the credibility problem with NFU, any future abandonment of this pledge could enhance Indian deterrence credibility, but this would not automatically translate into more excellent regional strategic stability.⁵²

NFU has an inherent disability of lacking credibility in a crisis,⁵³ so India's shift may reflect this reality, though this could be anticipated as an aggressive posture. India's transformation regarding nuclear posture may make its deterrence more credible, but it colossally depends on a reasonable willingness to use nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack.⁵⁴ Any transformation might authenticate Indian deterrence more credible, but it may bring little change unless there's a credible willingness to use nuclear weapons in response to a non-nuclear attack. However, deterrence stability is not directly dependent on the nuclear postures of relevant countries, but future instability could be translated through political and military advancements. Political hostility between nuclear weapons states is the foundation for creating balance through deterrence stability.⁵⁵ Any change in India's nuclear doctrine is directly related to the strategic posture of China and Pakistan, whom the move will be intended to affect. If India begins

⁵¹ Joshua White (Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins University), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁵² Bruno Tertrais, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁵³ Peng Guangqian and Rong Yu, "Nuclear First Use Revisited," *China Security*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (Winter 2009), 27–44.

⁵⁴ Iain King (Former UK Fellow at CSIS), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁵⁵ Achin Vanaik, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

implementing a change in nuclear doctrine, some indications will appear in procurement, deployment, and command and control pattern.⁵⁶

Pakistan has long maintained that it does not consider India's NFU pledge a credible posture, and Pakistan's convictions are much more strategically relevant than other powers, i.e., the United States. Notwithstanding, most the nuclear weapons states are reluctant to adopt the policy of NFU because NFU gives your adversaries a clear signal that at which point a country will respond with nuclear weapons. This is why several nuclear-armed powers, notably Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, have pursued a deliberate ambiguity approach. Contemporarily, India has shifted its posture to counter Pakistan's nuclear weapons capabilities – which could be used to offset the conventional asymmetry – with enhanced abilities to carry out counterforce strikes. A large-scale counterforce strike would not be a credible threat in a conventional conflict, but a counterforce strike against a nuclear attack could be considered credible signaling. India's quest for preemptive counterforce strike could lead to deterrence instability, and rival nuclear weapons states will further invest their resources to make its nuclear forces more survivable. This kind of strategy will coerce the rival state to put its nuclear forces in a position to "use them or lose them." Bunn has identified a fundamental dilemma of counterforce strikes: acquiring a capability to destroy the weapons in a preemptive strike is ideal in a military sense, but having that capability may make the adversary more likely to launch that weapon.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding a structured NFU strategy, there are reasons for concern that India may first use nuclear weapons, particularly in the

⁵⁶ Timothy D. Hoyt, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁵⁷ Matthew Bunn (Professor of the Practice of Energy at Harvard Kennedy School), e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

military crisis. In this regard, political instability could be detrimental to deterrence stability. For instance, the Balakot Crisis in February 2019 was about to spiral out of control, with India showing unwillingness to pursue its NFU policy. When Pakistan captured an Indian pilot at the apex of the crisis, several sources reported that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi earnestly deliberated a missile strike. Afterward, Modi stressed frequently that the threat was real, and he was willing to oblige what he termed a "night of murder" because Pakistan hadn't returned the pilot.⁵⁸ The domestic popular politics of the BJP has engaged India in a discourse where achieving deterrence stability is gradually getting out of hand. There are no national discourse for hardware criteria, usage, thresholds, and escalation management connections related to the NFU pledge prerequisites. Throughout its hasty hunt for various capabilities, Indian nuclear policy is unrestricted in terms of strategic modernization, including developing an operational nuclear triad. Suppose India is concerned about using NFU to supplement crisis management or peace initiatives or reducing nuclear arms usage. In that case, it will have to discourage large weapon acquisitions and nuclear weapons deployment, all in keeping with specified structured policies and practices.⁵⁹

India’s NFU Pledge and Nuclear Mainstreaming

Another aim of the NFU policy in the Indian context is to enable Indian lawmakers and officials to depict India as a responsible nuclear state. Indian analysts documented this contributory goal for the NFU as "*part of [India’s] ongoing efforts at constructing itself as a moderate and responsible power after it has shamelessly behaved in the most*

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Lewis, “Night of Murder”: On the Brink of Nuclear War in South Asia, "*Nuclear Threat Initiative*, November 6, 2019, Available at: <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/night-murder-brink-nuclear-war-south-asia/>. (Accessed on December 2, 2021).

⁵⁹ Sundaram and Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,"

immoderate and irresponsible manner by going openly nuclear! The [NFU] pledge is also a cover to enable India to go ahead and put a nuclear weapons system in place.”⁶⁰ Meanwhile, India has manipulated the United Nations as a specific place for spreading this ethical approach regarding the NFU. During a 2013 high-level United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Nuclear Disarmament Conference, Indian Minister of External Affairs Salman Khurshid reiterated India's position in global nuclear order, “as a responsible nuclear power, [who has] a credible minimum deterrence policy and a posture of no-first-use. [Indians] refuse to participate in an arms race, including a nuclear arms race [and] prepared to negotiate a global No-First-Use treaty and [India’s] proposal for a Convention banning the use of nuclear weapons remains on the table.”⁶¹ A similar kind of approach was adopted during a 2014 meeting of the UNGA Committee on Disarmament and International Peace when Ambassador DVB Varma said, “as a responsible nuclear power, India has a policy of credible minimum deterrence based on a no-first-use posture and non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states [and India is] prepared to convert these into bilateral or multilateral legally binding arrangements.”⁶²

The diplomatic initiative to identify India as a responsible nation with atomic weapons involves demands for numerous steps that oppose Indian policy. In the UNGA since the 1990s, India has been presenting a resolution every year calling for the creation of a "Convention on the Prohibition of the Use of Nuclear Weapons." The proposal demands to reaffirm that the possession or use of nuclear

⁶⁰ Praful Bidwai, *South Asia on a Short Fuse: Nuclear Politics and the Future of Global Disarmament* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 103.

⁶¹ As quoted in Sundaram and Ramana, 'India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons'.

⁶² "India Ready for Nuclear No-First-Use Agreements," *The Times of India*, October 22, 2014.

arms is an infringement of the UN Charter and a threat against humanity and also needs Disarmament Conference to launch talks to establish an international agreement banning or preventing, in all conditions, the usage or possibility of the use of nuclear weapons. The essence of these demands is opposed to the Indian nuclear ideology, which calls for nuclear weapons to be used in exchange for retaliatory attacks.⁶³ The NFU has also offered Indian policymakers a way to discourage foreign criticism and scrutiny of India's nuclear programme activities. For example, on the one hand, the UN Security Council adopted a draft resolution condemning Indian nuclear tests. On the other hand, the US appreciated the Indian nuclear policy while negotiating nuclear trade waivers.

India has avoided protracted isolation by constructing a so-called ethical approach of NFU. The international community accepted this pledge as a yardstick to measure the responsible behaviour of the Indian nuclear programme. New Delhi has exceedingly established a virtuous narrative regarding its nuclear posture, and the international community deliberately used the mantra of India being a responsible nuclear state to mainstream its nuclear programme. India has cashed on the benefits of this popular narrative, and a process of New Delhi's mainstreaming in global nuclear order was initiated with the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation in 2008. India has concluded civil nuclear arrangements with fourteen countries following its nuclear deal with the United States. Given the fact that the international community had already relaxed specific procedures to accommodate India in the global nuclear mainstream (e.g., the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) membership of India and membership in Australia Group, etc.), its yet to be seen how Indian nuclear doctrinal shift will upset global powers' behaviour towards India. Answers to these questions can be

⁶³ Sundaram and Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,"

inferred through a realist perspective, where state interests are more important than the moral standing of the Indian nuclear posture.

Indian shift from its NFU posture will have no impact one way or the other on global powers' behaviour towards New Delhi. The major global powers seem tolerant of India's behaviour under the pretext of the largest democracy, market share, and a dominant player to counter China.⁶⁴ India has a China-focused political partnership with the United States in the current international political scenario.⁶⁵ The main contesting area will remain India's pursuit to join NSG and China is likely to continue to block Indian entry into the NSG at any cost.⁶⁶ A change in public declaratory policy could exacerbate India's ambitions to gain NSG membership, which China is blocking. However, other States, including Mexico and New Zealand, have also seen Indian policy dismissively. It will lessen the case of India as a responsible and restrained state of the international nuclear order. Nevertheless, the basis of Chinese opposition to NSG membership in India will not be impacted.⁶⁷ There is also a possibility that any future shift in the Indian nuclear posture – mainly to materialize a preemptive counterforce strategy – will generate great powers' response on a scale where there will be no willingness to offer India a more significant role in international affairs (e.g., on the UN Security Council).⁶⁸

Conclusion

The approved India's nuclear policy incorporates a conditional NFU pledge with a salient feature of CMD and massive retaliation. India's nuclear policy does not express evidently what "credible" and "minimum" actually imply, and there is a credibility problem with India's massive retaliatory means. New Delhi is preparing grounds to

⁶⁴ Bruno Tertrais, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁶⁵ Achin Vanaik, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁶⁶ Matthew Bunn, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁶⁷ Joshua White, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

⁶⁸ Iain King, e-mail discussion with Hasan Ehtisham.

distance itself from the NFU pledge and changing the trajectory of employment options beyond NFU to provide more strategic choices for policymakers. Contemporarily, India's nuclear strategy is based on a mixed approach toward counter value and counterforce targets. India modernizes its nuclear forces for the optimal first use of nuclear weapons and flexible nuclear response. Though the strategy of acquiring the capability of comprehensive preemptive attack is farfetched, recent Indian attempts to pursue this course are highly destabilizing. India's quest for a preemptive counterforce strike could lead to deterrence instability because a large-scale counterforce strike would not be a very credible threat in a conventional conflict. The official dissolution of NFU could boost Indian deterrent legitimacy, but it would not necessarily lead to greater regional strategic stability. India may end up in a creative mode where it formally continues to adopt NFU and informally implement a First Use nuclear posture which will create further doubts in the strategic thinking of its nuclear adversaries. Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai (Retd) has deliberated upon this incongruity in the Indian strategic course during the Balakot crisis, where India consistently attempted to "induce strategic instability."⁶⁹

India manipulated the whole idea of NFU to depict itself as a responsible nuclear power and avoided protracted isolation of not being a part of global nuclear mainstreaming. Major international powers, especially the United States, had already relaxed certain procedures to accommodate India's global nuclear mainstream. If India alters its nuclear posture, it will not affect the international political behaviour of arrangements like MTCR, NSG, and Australia Group. Whatever the outcome of domestic political pressures on shaping Indian nuclear policy, the uncertainty regarding Indian nuclear posture

⁶⁹ Khalid Kidwai, "Pakistan's Policy of 'Quid Pro Quo Plus': Remarks by Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai (Retd) at the IISS London," *Strafasia*, February 7, 2020, Available at: <https://strafasia.com/gen-kidwai-speech-iiss-ciss-workshop-london-6-february-2020/>. (Accessed on November 15, 2021).

increases the risk of vertical nuclear/missile proliferation by New Delhi. The vague deterrence signals by India could cause its nuclear adversaries to adopt offensive crisis postures in fear of a preemptive nuclear strike. If NFU is a guiding instrument for India's nuclear weapons programme then it will have to discourage the acquisition and deployment of nuclear forces in large numbers.