

No- First Use Policy: Implications for Nuclear Politics and Strategy

Anamika Asthana

anamika.datsme@gmail.com

Doctoral Candidate

Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament

School of International Studies

Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract: This paper analyses the debates on the ‘No-First Use’ (NFU) policy enunciated under India’s nuclear doctrine in the wake of recent statement of Indian defence minister who argued that the doctrine is not writ in stone and therefore can be changed depending on the circumstances. This paper presents the viewpoints of both the moderates- who have argued in favour of adequacy of the doctrine and the NFU principle and the expansionists- who have argued that the NFU needs revision to accord more flexibility under the nuclear doctrine. This paper reiterates that the doctrine has served the Indian strategic interests well and does not need to be revised. It also situates this debate in the domestic politics context and assesses rationale behind it. The paper further argues that a revision of NFU is not only unnecessary but may even be counter-productive to India’s political and strategic interests.

Keywords: India’s Nuclear Doctrine, No-First Use Policy, Deterrence Stability, Signalling, Tactical Weapons, Domestic Politics

Introduction

Commemorating the death anniversary of ex-Prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said, “Till today, our nuclear policy is ‘no first use’. What happens in future depends on the circumstances. This, however, was not the first time when doubts were cast on India’s ‘No-First Use’ nuclear policy. Manohar Parkiar, India’s defence minister in 2016 also expressed dissatisfaction with this stand and said, “I wonder why we say that we don’t use nuclear weapons first. It doesn’t mean that India has to use nukes, but why rule out”. Later, the Ministry of Defence issued a statement terming it as a personal

opinion and expressed full commitment to the long-adhered policy. Indian strategists and scholars remain divided over this policy prescription and the debate is ongoing.

Official commitment to the policy, however, has been emphasized over the years including Prime ministerial address when India demonstrated its nuclear triad capability through the successful completion of first deterrence patrol of nuclear armed submarine INS Arihant in November 2018 (Pabby 2019). Singh's statement, however, has generated much heat over the renewed debate on the viability and usefulness of 'no-first use vs. first use posture'. This time, no balancing statement was issued by Ministry of Defence undermining the flexibility implied in the statement. Rather, Singh later tweeted, "Pokhran is the area which witnesses Atalji's firm resolve to make India a nuclear power and yet remain firmly committed to the doctrine of NFU. India has strictly adhered to this doctrine. What happens in future depends on the circumstances".

The debate could still be limited to strategic circles alone without indication of any probable change were it not for certain other developments recently. Prime minister, in the Independence Day speech announced the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff, a long due demand in the strategic and academic circles. A new military policy is also due in the month of October 2019 as per reports (Raja Mohan 2019). What does a change in 'no-first use' policy entail for India? How does it affect the nuclear deterrence stability in the region characterised by not only a hostile relationship between India and Pakistan but also India-China animosity and an 'all-weather' friendship between Pakistan and China?

The long-standing question of 'first-use versus no-first use' of nuclear weapons in facilitating deterrence stability and thereby preventing nuclear war has not been settled yet. There is no dearth of literature pondering over this question. The cold war time deterrence analysis reveals that militarily, it makes more sense for a conventionally superior power in a nuclear dyad to adopt no first use posture while conventionally inferior power might be tempted more to adopt first use posture to offset the conventional disadvantage. Basic assumption behind such deterrence stability posturing is the assumption that a nuclear war cannot be won. The destruction caused by few nuclear bombs too can be catastrophic for not only the countries involved but also for entire world. Some scientists have argued that given the heightened destructive potential of modern nuclear bombs and presuming that a hypothetical nuclear war would employ multiple nuclear weapons, there is a real possibility of nuclear winter because

of mushroom cloud of radioactivity and its impact on atmospheric conditions eventually leading to the dawn of another ice age. While calculation related to such doomsday prediction remain dicey, it being a hypothetical situation, a nuclear war in the South Asian sub-continent will definitely be catastrophic for countries in the region given their close proximity to each other.

While radioactivity menace remains one of the major dissuading factor in convincing nuclear weapon countries of restrained adventurism while dealing with nuclear weapons and nuclear policy, war-games and simulation exercises still entice strategists and academicians in nuclear war fighting scenarios. The possibility, even if remote, that one of these days, one of the nuclear weapon country might use nuclear weapon first to cause an unparalleled defeat of its enemy remains at the cornerstone of debates on 'first-use' nuclear policy.

India's Nuclear Doctrine

India's nuclear doctrine formulated in 1999 by Nuclear Security Advisory Board and revised in 2003 by the Cabinet Committee on Security underlines following principles:

- 1) Building and maintaining a credible minimum deterrent
- 2) A posture of "No First Use". Nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere.
- 3) Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.
- 4) Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the Nuclear Command Authority.
- 5) In the event 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.
- 6) Non – use of nuclear weapons against non – nuclear weapon states
- 7) A continuance of strict controls on export of nuclear and missile related materials and technologies and continued observance of the moratorium on nuclear tests
- 8) Continued commitment to the goal of a nuclear weapon free world, through global, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament.

No First Use as a Limitation

Many scholars contend that the NFU policy limits India's options and some flexibility around first use clause might serve Indian strategic needs better. Proponents seeking revision of 'no-first use' posture have offered following arguments:

- 1) The doctrine was formulated at a time when both Indian and Pakistani nuclear arsenal and forces were in infancy and therefore, it does not cater adequately to present and future conditions as Pakistan is developing full spectrum deterrence by developing and deploying tactical weapons. Pakistan tested its short-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles (NASR) in April 2011. At the same time, given the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan on account of economic hardships, it is likely to radicalize and become more unstable than ever in near future.
- 2) Belief in liberal international order and therefore probable taming of China and Pakistan through non-proliferation regime has been shattered. Both are advancing their nuclear weapon programs.
- 3) Strategic rationale of ambiguity in nuclear doctrine.
- 4) Pre-emptive purpose of first use strike. Shiv Shankar Menon also argued that India may need to resort to 'first-use' if it receives definite information of Pakistan trying to launch a nuke first.
- 5) India is inferior to China in conventional military capability and therefore it makes more sense to hold first use of nuclear weapons as a leverage in dissuading China, especially as China adheres to NFU.
- 6) Many strategists are sceptical of Indian resolve of launching a massive retaliation as a response to enemy's first strike on account of a reluctance to prevent further damages. Bharat Karnad (2002), additionally, points out that Indian bureaucracy is manifestly incapable of handling an emergency as dire as a nuclear strike.
- 7) P R Chari has argued that India's no-first use policy gives a level of confidence to Pakistan to carry out terrorism and limited wars or sub-conventional wars even if a full-blown war is dissuaded.
- 8) Expansionists or nuclear hawks also argue that NFU requires higher number of warheads and increased production of nuclear weapons as India needs to make sure that its inventory is able to survive the first attack and still be left with enough to retaliate massively. In fact, striking first nuclear attack might reduce the lethality of retaliation or even prompt the adversary to not retaliate with nuclear at all in order to avoid more damages (in best case scenario though highly improbable).

- 9) Proponents also argue that since Pakistan does not believe that in times of crisis or war, India would abide by its first use doctrine, it would not be reluctant in waging a pre-emptive strike or devising a nuclear attack plan irrespective of what the Indian nuclear doctrine says.
- 10) Nuclear deterrence operates at psychological level which means threat must be proportionate for it to be credible. Indian policy of NFU and massive retaliation both appear less than credible if Pakistan uses tactical weapons on Indian soldiers on its soil or on Indian soil. In fact, Indian strategists are also sceptical that India would respond with massive retaliation and lead to full blown nuclear war as a response to a small tactical nuclear weapon use by Pakistan.
- 11) India is situated between two nuclear armed countries which are not only hostile to India but also friendly with each other. “Adding flexibility to its unconditional NFU nuclear posture can help underpin deterrence” (Chellaney quoted in Roche 2019).

NFU: A Credible Pillar of Nuclear Doctrine

This paper reiterates that India's nuclear policy serves its strategic interests well and NFU does not demonstrate war pacifism on India's part but rather is based on a sound military logic. The NFU makes a military logic even in case of Pakistani deployment of nuclear weapons because the deterrence stability created through the mutually assured destruction caused by the policy of massive or punitive retaliation would still operate (Sethi). In fact, if India dilutes the policy and decides to develop and deploy tactical weapons as a response to Pakistan's tactical weapons, it would rather be seen as more credible deterrence and may prompt Pakistan to attempt a limited nuclear war. But the damage caused by tactical weapon too would be huge and there would be higher risk of nuclear escalation to strategic levels in highly-charges situation of limited nuclear war through tactical weapons. Dilution of NFU and massive retaliation would in this case cause deterrence instability and propel the two countries on the path of a nuclear war. Further an arms race involving tactical nuclear weapons will fuel misperceptions and miscalculations that will be harmful for deterrence stability in the region.

This paper further argues that while benefits of revising the NFU and making it flexible hardly adds to any advantage to the deterrence stability in the region, it invariably harms Indian strategic interests. These disadvantages are numerous.

A first-use posture declaration would need to be made credible by operational reorganization of India's nuclear forces. These would require changes in missile posturing and keeping them in mated and alerted condition unlike the present case where at least some of the Indian missiles are placed in de-alerted and de-mated state. NFU has strategic logic in the sense that it minimizes the dangers of accidental use, enables one to have a relaxed command control regime and safe nuclear arsenals and infrastructure (Rajagopalan 2019, Koithara 2012). Karnad (2005), however, argues that the relaxed posturing under NFU makes for a long chain of command and therefore higher vulnerability of nuclear forces getting disrupted in crisis situation.

First use posturing signals war-preparedness more credibly and while India does not need to hold back such signalling vis-à-vis Pakistan, it may not be a good idea in terms of its implications for India-China relations. India does need to showcase its defence preparedness with respect to China but given its own conventional inferiority and desire to avert nuclear war unless forced upon, would require it to downplay nuclear missiles deployment and readiness.

First use posturing has been justified by some scholars in a scenario where India may need to pre-empt adversary's nuclear attack. However, given the small geographical distance between India and Pakistan, or even India and China for that matter, it is doubtful as to how credible this window of opportunity for India to pre-emptively launch first nuclear attack. Moreover, the idea of pre-emptive nuclear strikes has been dealt with much more caution because it is one of the probable causes for creating deterrence instability forcing countries into nuclear war.

Pre-emptive strike is much difficult to operationalize. No country in the world, at this point, can claim to have the requisite intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance technology to launch a decapitating attack on the adversary to the extent that it becomes incapable of launching a retaliatory strike. As stated above, it can rather cause deterrence instability. In terms of credibility, retaliatory strikes would be easier to operationalize. Pre-emptive strike

requires umpteen amount of moral, political and strategic will and preparedness to be carried out. As Manpreet Sethi (2009) has argued, the NFU enables India to defend itself while enabling the onus of escalation to lie with the adversary. This moral dilemma of launching a nuclear war itself is strategically useful for deterrence stability. Even when the nuclear weapons have not been outlawed and are still treated as a currency of power, there is a tacit nuclear taboo operating with respect to the use of nuclear weapons (Tannenwald 1999). Revising NFU to enable the possibility of pre-emption from Indian side can work theoretically but is much difficult to operationalize. It, therefore, would make sense to step back and think about the cost and benefit of revising NFU to facilitate pre-emption or threat of pre-emption or first use policy. While strategic gains of revision remain highly dubious as stated above, political costs are yet to be assessed. Indian adherence to NFU has been instrumental in Indo-U.S. rapprochement after India's nuclear tests of 1998. Policies of NFU, concern for deterrence stability, export-control of sensitive technologies, commitment towards non-proliferation and disarmament, India's adherence to chemical and biological weapons conventions have been very instrumental in furthering its image and claim of being a responsible nuclear weapon state (Pant and Joshi 2019). This image has helped it in securing several gains in nuclear commerce through the exceptional NSG waiver. Reversal on any of these policies is bound to dent some of the goodwill that India so assiduously strived to build. It may not alienate American support at this point of time, given larger strategic alliance but it will not be perceived in good faith by other more critical members of international society.

India's relations with both China and Pakistan have taken a downturn since the abrogation of Article 370 and declaration of Jammu and Kashmir as a union territory of India. China even took the matter to the UNSC but its criticisms were handled in closed-door environment there. Given the highly strained relations, a change in nuclear force posturing will be perceived as inappropriate and hostile from Chinese viewpoint. This is not to argue that it is the prerogative of India alone to worry about deteriorating Indo-Chinese relations but India being a conventionally inferior power need to be cautious about its policy calibrations and force posturing. Even if one were to skip the signalling aspect of revising NFU, it is to be noted that China has its own NFU in place till now. Prakash Menon (2019) has suggested that India would gain more in lobbying with China for a Global No First Use Order (GNPU) rather than undermining it by resorting to first-use policy.

The argument about NFU having become outdated in the face of terrorist and sub-conventional strategies adopted by Pakistan may hold some ground. But as a matter of fact, nuclear weapons by their nature operate against rational actors and are effective against state units primarily. Non-state actors (NSAs) may or may not be deterred by the threat of use of nuclear weapons given their own predicament about their role in such terrorist movements i.e. whether their aim is to capture power or to create terror in the name of a just war. The first use posture per se too will not act as deterrent for NSAs.

Domestic Politics as a Factor in India's Nuclear Policy

India's nuclear policy has been shaped by domestic factors since the beginning. The decision of developing nuclear weapon too was affected by domestic electoral concerns for Indira Gandhi as well as the role of India's scientific bureaucracy (Sagan 1996; Kennedy 2011; Perkovich 1999). The 1998 nuclear tests were also a result of political ideological nature of the ruling dispensation of BJP. BJP's conception of a nationalist image and national power furtherance strategies emanate from a robust, masculine and militaristic conception of power and unclear weapons suit this imagery very aptly.

Singh's statement about possible revision of NFU can be analyzed in the context of threats of war propagated by Pakistani media after Indian abrogation of Article 370. It is difficult to argue at this point if the statement was a mere propaganda reply to Pakistan's poorly conceived war statements or an actual probability of change that may be brought about in India's nuclear policy. Though NFU has been seen as largely sensible to deterrence stability, the government may seek a change in it to project greater political willingness to undertake extreme measures in handling Pakistan, if the need be. Even if the government may not be serious in ever operationalizing a pre-emptive strike against Pakistan, a first-use posture will add ambiguity in the prevailing deterrence situation which government sees to believe, is a good thing. Jury is still out on usefulness of ambiguity as a concept in furthering nuclear deterrence. What the statement has managed to achieve irrespective of its implications for deterrence stability is sending out a message that the BJP government is willing to adopt unconventional measures in projecting an image of India as a powerful nation.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that though the NFU makes adequate sense in terms of political, moral and strategic calculation for India. It not only is able to maintain deterrence stability but also accrues political benefit to India in terms of its image as a responsible nuclear weapon state. It also concludes that advocacy for first use option is rooted in a myopic understanding of implications of a nuclear war which believes that a nuclear war can be won. The paper also concludes that nuclear policy too is not impervious from the effects of domestic political considerations and therefore, the BJP government in power may abandon the NFU in favour of a more flexible response.

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