

Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for Minimum Deterrence in South Asia

Zafar Khan *

Abstract

A decade and a half after the testing of its nuclear weapons in 1998, India is gradually transforming its nuclear policy. This consistent shift in India's policy-making is taking place in almost all the major areas related to its deterrent forces. There appears to be a reappraisal in India's credible minimum deterrence. This paper explores areas of India's nuclear policy which are undergoing a gradual shift. In light of the essentials of minimum deterrence- as part of a theoretical explanation- the argument put forth traces out whether India's emerging policy transformation, formulation, and their execution are in accordance with the spirit of minimum deterrence conceived in principle. The paper concludes that India's nuclear policy transformation in most areas and sub-areas is not quite consistent with the minimum deterrence criteria set here. In so doing, these inconsistencies could have dire implications for minimum deterrence in South Asia in general, and the non-proliferation regime in particular.

Introduction

It is by and large understood that India claims to be the largest democracy in the world. It is also observed that India claims to have a centralised civilian control of its deterrent forces. In addition, India officially proclaims that it follows minimum deterrence; that its deterrent forces are in disassembled positions, it does not possess large and expensive nuclear weapons, and it prides itself in following a no-first use (NFU) option. Theoretically, these statements meet the standard of minimum deterrence discussed in this study, but in reality India is making a gradual shift in its nuclear policy orientation that might contradict the essentials of the minimum conceived here. As a starting point in understanding India's nuclear policy, one cannot ignore the essential works covered by George Perkovich, Ashley Tellis, Barahat Karnad, and Rajesh

* Dr Zafar Khan is an assistant professor at the Department of Strategic and Nuclear Studies, National Defense University, Islamabad. The research areas of his interest are nuclear policy and proliferation/non-proliferation issues, falling within the ambit of security studies.

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

Basrur- just to name a few in the Indian nuclear domain.¹ These works in the existing literature provide us a significant understanding of India's nuclear policy, its strategy and doctrine.² Nevertheless, it is examined that all nuclear weapon states retain a level of ambiguity within their nuclear policies and strategies. These policies are either officially documented or declared through official or semi-official statements. The level of ambiguity varies from one nuclear weapons state to another. Most importantly, it depends on the changed and/or changing strategic environment of that particular region.

With India on the economic rise, it is important to see India's recent policy trends in relation to its deterrent forces. Arguably, with more economic strides, India spends more on its defense. That said, India consistently improves its conventional force capability, its missile technology is on the rise, it is making endeavours to acquire second-strike capability in terms of both nuclear submarine development and inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM). It is also believed that India is developing a multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV) technology to increase its deterrent strike capability, modelling some parts of its deterrent forces at pre-mated position, and introducing a shift from its traditional NFU option to most possibly a no-early first use or first-use. After more than a decade and a half of nuclear weapon tests (1998), the emerging shift can be observed in almost all essential areas of India's nuclear policy. In light of these developments, the question is this: does India's gradual shift in its nuclear policy remain consistent with the minimum deterrence conceived in this study? Consequently, this paper attempts to trace out "the known unknown"³; that is, whether India's gradual shift in nuclear policy remains consistent with the minimalist and defensive modes/ingredients of minimum deterrence as envisioned by its predecessors, or if India's policy transformation goes beyond the minimum deterrence it proclaims. There is little or no work done on the emerging shift in India's nuclear policy, as India makes endeavours to get special wavier from the nuclear suppliers group, improves its economy, makes efforts to include itself in the club of P-5- which effectively means to secure a permanent place in the United Nations Security Council (including veto power status), and maintains its resilience of hegemony in the South Asian region. The gradual increase and modernisation of its deterrent forces are the contemporary prospects of interest within India's nuclear policy shift, and its implications on the region need to be closely examined. In doing so, this article explores significant areas of India's nuclear policy in terms of its gradual policy transformation in light of the essentials of minimum deterrence, and analyses the implications of this gradual shift for the South Asian region. It is pertinent thus to go back to the essentials of minimum deterrence and understand India's nuclear policy transformation; that is, to examine India's various policy trends, and then trace out if the current New

Delhi policy orientation is consistent with the minimum deterrence conceived here.

Essentials of Minimum Deterrence

The concept of minimum deterrence⁴ was developed during the Cold War period, when on the one hand the US and the former Soviet Union/Russia were rapidly expanding their deterrent forces to inflict unacceptable damage against each other, but on the other hand, the world of critics established an idea of a minimum, which revolves around a few survivable nuclear forces.⁵ These lowest numbers of nuclear forces could inflict unacceptable degrees of damage. A few of these critics went further to note that the use of just *one* nuclear weapon could be unacceptable to the adversary. The minimum provided the idea that the adversary's attacks could be prevented with the fewest number of nuclear weapons possible. In other words, such a 'minimum' could deter, and there was absolutely no need for building more. Indeed, force structure build-ups, and the operationalisation and declaratory policy orientation of deterrent forces are required at the minimum level. Minimum deterrence is a complex conceptual phenomenon. The minimum based on "the lowest level of damage ...with the fewest number of nuclear weapons"⁶ permits a number of interpretations regarding the precise nature of that particular level of damage and/or number of warheads. A long-forgotten concept of minimum deterrence existed in the US during the early stages of the Cold War, when the US Navy claimed to destroy "all of Russia" with 45 submarines and 720 warheads⁷, and this may still be interpreted as a minimum compared with the hundreds and thousands built in the later phases of the Cold War. British, French and Chinese notions of minimum deterrence remain modest.⁸ India follows minimum deterrence, but it is reluctant to define what it means by 'minimum'. Despite the inherent complexity, how can the basics of minimum best explain the phenomenon of minimum deterrence?

Firstly, after the use of nuclear weapons in the incident of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapon states learnt a lesson from the military use of such arsenal. Given the destructive characteristics of nuclear weapons, it was decided that these are other types of weapons, and must never be used militarily in the event of a crisis. Therefore, the political aspect was prioritised, which supports the minimalist nature of deterrence to achieve the desired political objectives. What the political aspect entails is: lesser the deterrent forces, the lesser we rely on them, which is for the better.

Second, the idea behind a political priority of deterrent forces was that these forces can cause unacceptable levels of destruction. Risk is the starting point in

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

elaborating the basics of minimum deterrence, which remains central to nuclear deterrence. The fear and risk of the nuclear weapons' use deter the adversary from starting a war. At the minimalist level, risk centrally emphasises that there is no "probability of victory", rather, adversaries may confront the "possibility of annihilation." Minimum highlights that the risk is associated with the use of nuclear weapons, and it would cause more damage than benefit. Central to fear, the risk of nuclear weapons' use deters states from waging a war. Risk and the fear associated with the nuclear weapons' use have a close link with 'existential deterrence', where the mere existence of nuclear weapons could deter the adversary from waging a war in the first place.

Third, if risk is the starting point to elaborate the basics of minimum deterrence, then few- not more- warheads are enough to deter. The phenomenon associated with 'few' or 'small' deterrent forces can be interpreted as: few can deter. Powerful nuclear weapon states with bigger and sophisticated numbers have been deterred by smaller nuclear weapon states with smaller and less sophisticated numbers of deterrent forces. The US in the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, and the former Soviet Union in the Sino-Soviet border conflict were deterred by small nuclear forces.⁹ Similarly, the smaller numbers of nuclear forces of Pakistan and India deterred each other from waging a full-scale war during both the Kargil crisis in 1999 and the 2001-2002 border confrontation.¹⁰

Fourth, although the Cold-War-type deterrence was based on bigger sizes, technological sophistication, and greater number, these are discouraged at the minimalist level. Since it is argued that nuclear weapons are not used for war-fighting purposes and should not therefore be militarily prioritised, bigger sizes and expensive technological sophistication are characteristics that are discouraged by the basics of minimum deterrence. Moreover, bigger sizes and larger number of deterrent forces matter little at the minimalist level, entailing that the survivability of a small number of forces can be deterring, which may help build a second-strike capability in exchange for a Triad. The bigger sizes and large number of nuclear forces encourage arms competition between the two adversaries, and create difficulty in the command and control posture. The smaller the nuclear weapons, the easier they can be hidden, and the quicker they can be assembled if absolutely needed to ensure the credibility of nuclear deterrence. The bigger the size of deterrent forces, the harder the command and control system would be, and all the more difficult to conceal and disperse.

Fifth, minimum deterrence requires an exercise in recalling the always/never taxonomy- that deterrent forces should never be used when they are not needed, and should always be under the command and instructions of the political leaders

when absolutely needed, in order to establish the credibility and survivability of nuclear weapons and minimise their accidental use. However, the essence of minimum deterrence prioritises the political aspect of nuclear deterrence. It encourages the dispersal and concealment of nuclear forces. Deployment at the forward-edged position is discouraged, which permits the risk of pre-delegation and force protection. Delegation of launch authority is critiqued. Minimum deterrence encourages a centralised command and control to avoid these worries of deterrent forces. Minimum also urges that deterrent forces be kept in disassembled states to avert the misuse of nuclear weapons.

Sixth, the essence of minimum deterrence urges the arms control and disarmament process to reduce the danger of arms race and the possibility of nuclear weapons' use. At the minimalist level, the process of arms control and disarmament discourages the salience of nuclear weapons, and helps reduce the risk of military escalation to the nuclear level.

In summary, minimum deterrence requires very little to deter. A few survivable numbers of deterrent forces have deterred adversary states with bigger numbers and larger and sophisticated sizes of nuclear warheads during the Cold War period. There is no reason why a similar strategy may not deter effectively in the present era. The mere existence and centrality of the risk and fear associated with the nuclear weapons' use induce the credibility and prioritise the political prospect of deterrent forces. This brief theoretical explanation help elaborate whether or not India's policy of credible minimum deterrence and its salient features are consistent with minimum deterrence conceived thus far in this article. Under this conceptual theoretical construct, the paper examines India's nuclear policy shift in different aspects of its deterrent forces, and its implications for the South Asian region.

India's Policy of Credible Minimum Deterrence

Prior to its 1998 nuclear tests, India followed the 'non-weaponised' and 'recessed' nuclear deterrence. India also remains under the concept of "nuclear opacity" despite carrying out nuclear weapon test in 1974, which India terms a "peaceful nuclear explosion". In the wake of the 1998 nuclear tests, India declared that it would follow a credible minimum deterrence (CMD). However, there was no concrete clarification of what it meant by minimum- of how many weapons India would require to substantiate that its nuclear posture towards Pakistan is minimum, and how many deterrent forces it would then take India to make its posture credible towards China. In other words, how can India's policy stance be that of a *minimum* towards one and get *credible* to another? This

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

indicates the existence of a 'calculated ambiguity' within India's nuclear policy, despite being officially documented. This could either be incidental or intentional. Also, this indicates that some level of policy ambiguity exists in India's realms of theoretical and operational nuclear policy-making.

In the second official round of India's 2003 nuclear policy draft, the apex of India's National Command Authority (NCA) officially stated that India would maintain a CMD. However, it was not clearly defined what was meant by minimum, and what the difference was between minimum deterrence and minimum credible deterrence.¹¹ The officials are not yet sure if either minimums would remain a lower limit both at the theoretical and operational levels of India's nuclear policy, or if it would go beyond the basic concepts of minimum conceived in this study; that is, the changing policy trends discussed below indicate a rapid policy transformation within the span of one and a half decade since nuclear weapons were tested. This phenomenal shift takes us back to the Cold War period, when both the US and the former Soviet Union possessed thousands of nuclear weapons, particularly in their initial phases of nuclear weapons' development, largely based on a deterring posture of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). A balance of terror ruled and lingered throughout the Cold War period. Both the Cold War powers went for the "overkill" strategy. This is something that Robert J. Oppenheimer, who is widely known as the father of the atomic bomb, linked the then scenario with, "two scorpions in a bottle each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life."¹² Because of lessons from the Cold War era, India may not opt for thousands of nuclear weapons unnecessarily. However, with the rapid transformation of India's nuclear policy, India appears to have marked the footings of a Cold-War-like offensive and aggressive doctrinal posture albeit in a different, South Asian strategic environment. Given the calculated ambiguity within the conceptual understanding of minimum deterrence, it appears that India's rapid evolution of nuclear policy towards ambitious projects resides deep within the kernel of minimum deterrence, a proclivity that contemporary nuclear strategists need to explore.

India's gradual modernisation of its conventional forces and increasing of the number of both strategic and non-strategic weapons' capability undermines the significance of minimum deterrence it initially conceived. The minimum, in this case, does not quite remain a minimum.

First, it is not clear what India means by CMD, seeing that it needs to evaluate its deterrent capability towards both China and Pakistan, with the latter being the immediate threat; gauge how many forces India would require against

China; and what should be the level of deterrent forces against Pakistan. Anything that is credible and/or goes beyond the significance of minimum towards China may not be termed minimum towards Pakistan. Therefore, “what is credible towards China will likely not be minimum towards Pakistan; and what is minimum towards Pakistan cannot be credible towards China.”¹³ India unintentionally and/or deliberately creates a strategic scenario in which one finds more ambiguity, vagueness and confusion; therefore, it puts a lot of pressure on the Indian nuclear leadership to resolve this dilemma without necessarily pulling one or the other adversary into a vicious cycle of arms race.

Second, the Indian Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) is earnestly chalking out plans to make all of its missiles nuclear-capable. The DRDO has recently tested Agni III and V, and would perhaps carry out a test of Agni VI soon. These missiles’ development make India part of a club which comprises the five established nuclear weapon states (the US, Russia, China, UK and France), making India the sixth nuclear weapons state to possess intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). That said, India is expanding its strategic reach against China. India has also developed the *Shourya* 750km with hypersonic capability which, according to Indian officials, cannot be detected by satellite images. In addition to these long- and intermediate- range missiles, India has also developed short range missiles such as *Prahaar*, which is a tactical nuclear weapon. Pakistan believes that India had already commenced its program of producing tactical nuclear weapons long before Pakistan tested *Nasr* (TNW).¹⁴ India might have been the first in line, pulling Pakistan unnecessarily into an unending arms race.

Third, India has recently developed nuclear submarines and tested nuclear-submarine-launched missiles such as *Arihant* and *Sagarika*. Although India is in the initial stages of nuclear submarine development- after being confronted with technical issues and many accidents in the old Russian-supplied submarine technology recently- India is serious enough to go for a successful Triad. India is in an experimental cycle in terms of developing a feasible nuclear submarine. Perhaps it would take time, like it took the Chinese to develop a reliable, effective and credible submarine, one that goes deep into the blue sea. For now, it is not clear whether India’s nuclear submarine would remain a coastal or blue sea submarine. India could buy more time and spend extra money on the improvement of a viable submarine mechanism. These developments and the induction of nuclear-powered submarines have put Pakistan under strategic pressure and concerns. Pakistan’s naval chief Muhammad Asif Sandila stated in reaction to the induction of India’s nuclear-capable submarines that, “the strategic dimension of India’s naval build-up is a cause for concern. We are

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

mindful of this development and taking necessary measures to restore the strategic balance.”¹⁵

However, Pakistan's defense analyst Dr Farrukh Saleem has stated in a Pakistani local TV channel while debating India's nuclear submarine that India's launch of a Russian nuclear-powered submarine is a *non-event* as far as Pakistani security is concerned. His assertion is based on the following reasons: 1) it is a non-attack submarine and can merely be used for deterrence purposes; 2) it is not Pakistan-specific, rather, it is made to contain China; 3) it is launched 3000 km away from Pakistan; 4) it is merely a symbolic deterrence gesture of India's naval force. India had already deployed a Russian-origin nuclear powered submarine in 1988; and 5) these submarines are based on Russian technology and many Russian submarines of a similar technology had drowned before accomplishing their deterrence periods. Pakistan, therefore, needs to maintain its minimum deterrence without plunging into a vicious cycle of force building with its adversary.¹⁶ In a similar fashion, Maria Sultan stated, “For a Triad, much depends on how secure a state's nuclear forces are.”¹⁷ In connection to these growing security concerns, *Margalla Papers* by National Defense University Islamabad stated that: “Any future threat scenario against Pakistan shall most probably have complex multidimensional facts i.e. sub-conventional and unconventional actors too. Therefore, to cover such a large spectrum of threat dimensions, a reappraisal of Pakistan's nuclear capabilities as well as policy is urgently required.”¹⁸ However, it can be argued that considering the essentials of minimum deterrence, Pakistan can achieve second-strike capability through practices of dispersal and concealment of its deterrent forces. The credibility and survivability of minimum deterrent forces, which are essential ingredients of minimum deterrence, can also provide Pakistan a second-strike capability in the event of an extremist confrontation.¹⁹ There is no substantial evidence whether any technological wherewithal has gone as far as tracing out the dispersed and deeply concealed deterrent forces, and therefore the idea of deeply buried hard targets being revealed and subsequently hit is not entirely plausible. The credibility and survivability of even the minimum level of deterrent forces has a deterring psychological impact on the adversary, signalling them not to attack.

Fourth, in addition to the above, India's DRDO is rapidly working on the development of ballistic missile defense (BMD). This raises the question as to whether the Indian civilian leadership holds greater sway on the overall command and control structure of India's nuclear policy, which the civilian leadership largely claims to have, but is now losing its central influences to the Indian bureaucratic and scientific organisations such as DRDO. It is observed that the multilayered BMD system would include *Prithvi* Air Defense (PAD) and

Ashwin-based Advanced Air Defense (AAD) theatre-based systems to help India protect a few cities, if not all the cities.²⁰ India is also planning to develop MIRV, perhaps without political authorisation. This takes India to the Cold War type of sophisticated arms' development, which provides India the advantage of "first strike capability". It would also make India appear more offensive, causing escalation dominance. These new developments as part of India's nuclear policy transformation would certainly remain a cause of concern for Pakistani nuclear decision-making mechanism, which in turn could cause another layer of arms race, and could also bring implications on Pakistan's nuclear policy transformation, formulation and execution— a signal to the adversary to respect its (Pakistan's) core strategic interests. This is discussed later. First, it is important to elaborate certain key areas of India's policy transformation that make India depart gradually from minimum deterrence.

India's Policy of No-First Use

A country in possession of nuclear weapons frames its nuclear doctrinal use of nuclear weapons in accordance with the changed strategic environment, both at the international and regional level. This could be the first-use (FU) or the no-first use (NFU) of nuclear option, in order to ensure the existence and enhance the credibility of deterrent forces. There has been a debate between the two Cold-War-era adversaries (the US and the former Soviet Union) on the nuclear use doctrinal posture. Although the Cold War has ended, the Soviet Union is disintegrated, and the US has achieved sophisticated modernisation of conventional forces in terms of size, accuracy, and lethality, the US still continues to follow the FU nuclear option. It was expected that the US in its Nuclear Posture Review policy document (NPR) in 2010 would advocate normalisation and relaxation in its nuclear policy with regards to a modest shift from FU to NFU which, in turn, could provide incentives to other nuclear weapon states' policies. This has not happened so far. We do not know yet what the forthcoming NPR would say about the US nuclear doctrinal use. Arguably, the policies of major nuclear weapon states affect the policies of the smaller nuclear weapon states.

Despite the Indian official claim of a strict NFU of nuclear weapons in the immediate aftermath of its nuclear weapon test, there appears to be a shift in India's nuclear doctrinal use; that is, India moves out of an NFU posture. For example, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated that India would not use its nuclear weapons against both non-nuclear and nuclear weapon states²¹. However, there was a dramatic shift in doctrinal use of deterrent forces in 2003, where India now claims that it reserves the right to use nuclear forces if Indian

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

forces are attacked anywhere, and if chemical and biological weapons are used against India. The Indian cabinet committee on security review stated that: "however, 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."²² This undermines the previous Indian commitment of an NFU.²³ It can be argued that India's doctrinal use of deterrent forces is shrouded by calculated ambiguity, which is looked at through the lens of suspicion in its neighbourhood. It is not clear whether India's nuclear doctrinal use falls in the category of 'absolute NFU' or 'no-early first use', or if it resides somewhere in between these two possible streams. Pakistan's ex-foreign secretary Shamshad Ahmed rejected India's offer of an NFU agreement, which he categorically stated as "unacceptable".²⁴ Even India has differing views on whether or not it would retain an NFU option.²⁵ Pakistan rejects this stance, saying that, "India's declaration that it would not be the first to launch a nuclear strike is a cost-free exercise in sanctimonious propaganda."²⁶ Apparently, Pakistan rejects India's official claim of an NFU in a similar way as the US does against the Chinese NFU option. The element of distrust informed by realism exist in the contemporary world politics, be that the international political economy, or the politics of nuclear weapons amongst nuclear-capable states.

There exists a perception in India, that India could undermine the adversary's nuclear deterrent forces with its conventional force, which could then undermine the clear distinction between the conventional and nuclear targets once they are set forth by the Indian army or air force during crisis time.²⁷ This new development on the part of some responsible Indian organisations that deal with the deterrent forces could eventually bypass the central civilian control of India's nuclear weapons, both during peace and crisis times. Arguably, the reality show becomes inconsistent with India's initial official conceptualisation of an NFU and the essentials of minimum deterrence conceived here. Vipin Narang states that the fact that India has "an absolute NFU policy is officially and demonstrably false."²⁸ This proves true the long-standing adversarial assertions of doubt on India's absolute NFU stance.

Although there was some talk recently on India's Cold Start doctrine (CSD), most part of this doctrine remains classified for obvious reasons. Since the Kargil episode of 1999 and India-Pakistan border confrontation of 2001-2002, India desires to avert further frustration, and would like to enable her armed forces with sophisticated weaponry system with its centre close to the border of Pakistan, so that it enables India to wage a limited war rapidly, and achieve its political and military objectives. But the fact remains that CSD, if and when formulated and executed, would be in the presence of both strategic and tactical

nuclear weapons on the other side of the border. Both CSD and the nuclear presence, and perhaps the quicker readiness of nuclear weapons during the crisis time, make India withdraw reluctantly from a limited war-fighting CSD. Also, if India still officially remains strict to the principles of NFU, then an NFU option would help constrain India in launching the CSD. The offensive launch of CSD-which makes India appear more hegemonic and offensive- would make India depart from an NFU. Therefore, the question is: would CSD affect India's doctrinal posture of NFU? This is a question to which the answer remains uncertain, when it comes to the would-be, limited conflict between India and Pakistan in the presence of nuclear weapons. Indian strategic statements are still consistent, albeit uncertain, using expressions such as "unacceptable damage" and "massive retaliation", seemingly intended to convince Pakistan of the possibility of India's eventual departure from an NFU as it prepares for CSD to wage a limited war.²⁹ Critics point to nuanced changes in Indian nuclear doctrine that make it more likely for India to use nuclear weapons in a future conflict.³⁰ Others maintain that the formulation of CSD lowers the nuclear threshold, thereby threatening strategic stability in South Asia.³¹ In doing so, this indicates a gradual shift in India's nuclear policy. With regard to its deterrent force development, India is making dynamic changes, which in turn make New Delhi move from a minimalist to a maximalist policy posture.

Fissile Materials: Deterrent Capability from a Minimalist to Maximalist Posture

The India-US nuclear deal in 2005, which eventually became the law between the US and India in 2008, enables India to acquire nuclear reactors. This also enables India to produce a greater amount of fissile materials. Some of these nuclear reactors would remain unguarded. India recently claimed that it would make nuclear reactors under the international safeguards in a phased manner.³² India's tactics and reluctance in placing all of its nuclear reactors under the international safeguards mechanism indicates its desire for acquiring more fissile materials, in order to increase its deterrent force capability. Islamabad believes that the conclusion of the US-India nuclear deal and the Nuclear Suppliers Group's (NSG) special waiver to its counterpart would have far-reaching security implications for the South Asian region. On various occasions, Pakistan has raised this concern, and urged the Conference on Disarmament (CD-nations) that due to the changed regional security dynamics, Islamabad would maintain the credibility of its deterrence. Pakistan observes that the US-India nuclear deal would help India increase its existing stockpile of fissile materials, which in turn would assist New Delhi in producing more deterrent forces. Pakistani ambassador Maleeha Lodhi pointed out that: "Given its ambition to acquire

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

hundreds of nuclear warheads (400 according to one estimated figure), India faces the dilemma of how to build this arsenal while meeting its civilian nuclear needs. This problem was resolved by its deal with the United States.”³³ Also, Islamabad expresses its concerns over the NSG’s special treatment of India, which in turn undermines Pakistan’s deterrence credibility.³⁴ Pakistan’s National Command Authority (NCA) stated that Islamabad’s policy towards the FMCT would be based on its national security interests and the objectives of strategic stability in South Asia. The NCA noted in December 2010 that: “Such policies, detrimental as they are to international peace and security, undermine the credibility of the existing non-proliferation regime, and are inconsistent with the national laws and international obligations. Revisionism based on strategic, political or commercial considerations accentuates asymmetries and would perpetuate instability, especially in South Asia.”³⁵

Given the recent accelerated production of fissile materials in South Asia, it is considered that the gap between Islamabad’s stockpile and that of New Delhi’s remains wide.³⁶ The increasing asymmetry in fissile materials’ stockpiles between the two countries makes Islamabad more reluctant in withdrawing its veto from the FMCT negotiations.³⁷ India has not yet become part of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and would probably not sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the near future. Also, it is not interested in joining the FMCT in the foreseeable future.³⁸ All these developments become inconsistent with the essentials of minimum deterrence as India enhances its capability to produce more fissile materials, which could make India the world’s fifth largest nuclear weapons state.³⁹ Pakistan knows that the region’s increasingly changed security environment affects Pakistan’s stance on the FMCT. For example, India’s development of CSD, its pursuit of a ballistic missile defense system, and its increasing fissile materials build-up put pressure on Pakistan’s strategic options. A leading Pakistani analyst, Jaspal, evaluated that: “[These] strategic constraints necessitate Islamabad to increase its fissile materials stockpile and rejuvenate its nuclear weapons capability for the foreseeable future. Indeed, the embryonic South Asian strategic environment obligates Pakistan to build more missiles and more warheads, which require more fissile materials.”⁴⁰ The US-India nuclear deal and the NSG special waiver enable India to make a rapid nuclear policy transformation; that is, India could have already commenced its departure from minimalist to maximalist policy objectives. India is making consistent endeavours to bring about its policy transformation in a way that would appear both minimal towards Pakistan and credible to China. However, in fact, the dilemma is unlikely to be resolved, as the calculated ambiguity within India’s officially documented policy continues to persist. This ambiguity even

exists on the initial belief that India's nuclear deterrent forces are kept in a disassembled position.

India's Policy Shift on the State of Deterrent Forces

Key readings on India's nuclear policy show that India's nuclear forces are kept small, controlled centrally by the civilian leadership, and placed in disassembled position. This was commonly believed in the initial years of India's nuclear tests in 1998. For example, Ashley Tellis noted, "The weapons and delivery systems are developed and produced, with key subcomponents maintained under civilian custody, but these assets are not deployed in any way that enables the prompt conduct of nuclear operations. Such assets are, in fact, sequestered and covertly maintained in distributed form, with different custodians exercising strict stewardship over the components entrusted to them for safekeeping."⁴¹ If this is the case, then India's nuclear policy remains consistent with the principles of minimum deterrence. However, according to recent readings, India may not be consistent with these principles any longer; that is, it is observed now that not all of India's deterrent forces are in a de-mated position. Based on India's policy of "assured destruction" and "massive retaliation", India now appears to be readying a "subset of its deterrent forces, if not all of its deterrent forces."⁴² India incorporates "canisterised" and "encapsulated" tactics within its deterrent forces, which help make Indian forces pre-mated to delivery vehicle.⁴³ On the application of the encapsulated tactics, the new head of DRDO Dr Avinash Chander stated that they were, "working on canisterised systems that can launch from anywhere at any time...[and] making much more agile, fast-reacting, stable missiles so that response can be within minutes."⁴⁴ Currently, with these so-called tactics of encapsulation, India is readying some parts of its missile system (e.g., Agni missile family) in a pre-mated position so that it could be readied rapidly in minutes, not hours, as was previously considered. This practice is carried out both during peace and crisis times.⁴⁵ India's subset deterrent force's (if not the whole's) readiness would have implications on the South Asian strategic stability.

Strategic Implications in the South Asian Region

India's gradual shift in its nuclear policy has certain strategic implications on the South Asian region, which need future scholarship to chalk out how these would then shape the changing/changed strategic South Asian environment.

First, there was suspicion from the Pakistani side already with regards to India's NFU option, which Pakistani officials did not accept when India offered

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

it first; this has become substantiated recently in India's policy documentation, that India would use nuclear weapons against chemical and biological weapons attacks anywhere against its forces. The possibility for getting Pakistan on board on the policy of an NFU becomes almost irrelevant with this changing strategic environment. This creates more ambiguity and mistrust in the South Asian region, as India makes a gradual shift in its nuclear policy and pulls Pakistan into this arms race.

Second, with the gradually increasing deterrent force build-up, New Delhi leaves the impression of an unending arms race in the region, which in turn makes its adversaries (China and Pakistan) think of their deterrent forces' modernisation, procurement, and refurbishment. This then makes the inter-state conflict between these nuclear weapon states alive. With the increased force development along with their readiness, India appears to test the credibility of deterrent stability in the South Asian region. The deterrent force readiness might complicate the deterrent signalling posture towards both China and Pakistan. It enhances misunderstanding, as India appears to look more aggressive on its posture. India may afford to go for more deterrent forces and develop a Triad given its recent economic strides, but India affects the deterrence and strategic stability of the South Asian region as its counterpart Pakistan may not afford this option due to poor economic development. Islamabad may have a few options with regard to South Asian strategic stability: 1) maintain the minimum credible deterrence; 2) chalk out a pragmatic policy orientation for reappraisal of minimum deterrence; and 3) continue to hold nuclear confidence building measures with its adversary, and bring China to become part of the triangle for the ultimate creation of an arms control regime, which in turn could have positive outcomes. Amongst them could be the following: a) it would slow down the arms race in the region; b) it provides strategic stability in the South Asian region; c) it helps reduce the chances of inter-state conflict; and d) this could then pave the way for becoming part of the wider debate on arms control and disarmament processes, something the major nuclear weapon states pledged under the provisions of the non-proliferation regime.

Third, India's strategic force command may remain consistent with the doctrinal posture of "launch after hit." These tactics of readiness could bring slight and/or gradual policy transformation to "launch on warning" or "launch under attack" posture, which in turn provides India the "first strike" capability, stepping up the escalation ladder. This provides an indicator of India's official departure from an NFU to FU option, which could make Chinese worry about its long traditional marking of an NFU that it declared officially in the immediate

wake of its 1964 nuclear tests. The absence of an NFU option would then increase the reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes in South Asia.

Last but not the least, the impact on India's gradual shift in policy has much to do with the extra-regional link factor in which both China and India are affected by what happened out there between the US and Russia. Despite the strategic partnership between the Cold War rivals, both the US and Russia still consistently sustain the core ingredients of their deterrent forces. Both rely on nuclear forces for deterrence purposes. For example, as the US relies on the development of ballistic missile defense system and maintains the extended deterrence as part of its nuclear policy, Russia remains reluctant to reduce the number of their tactical nuclear weapons. Also, Russia develops the number of warheads on their intercontinental ballistic missiles. The outside strategic environment affects China and India at the regional level, and Pakistan is pulled into this strategic game unnecessarily. For example, the India's CSD made Pakistan develop a full spectrum of deterrence in terms of testing short range missiles Nasr, often termed a tactical/battle-field nuclear weapon, to plug the deterrence gap. Also, India's increasing deterrent forces via US-India nuclear deal and special waiver from the NSG and other suppliers groups make Pakistan think of a reappraisal of its minimum deterrence, as minimum deterrence in a changed/changing strategic environment cannot truly be determined. It becomes a challenging factor for the non-proliferation regime in the South Asian region, given the unfolding shift in India's nuclear posture.

Conclusion

In light of the theoretical framework of minimum deterrence, that is the essentials of minimum deterrence, one may assume that the actuality of minimum deterrence may no longer exist as a significant factor amongst the programs and policies of both major and smaller nuclear weapon states. This is largely observed in India's nuclear policy which, in the wake of nuclear weapon tests in 1998, is gradually transforming itself. The shifts can be observed in most areas and sub-areas of India's nuclear policy. Theoretically, what India initially conceptualised was that it would maintain credible minimum deterrence, it would not acquire bigger and expensive deterrent forces, it would keep the nuclear doctrine of an NFU, and its deterrent forces would remain in a disassembled state. These are consistent with the essential ingredients of minimum deterrence conceived here. However, in fact, most areas of India's nuclear policy are shrouded by secrecy and calculated ambiguity, under the pretext of minimum deterrence. For example, with the gradual policy transformation, formulation and execution, India falls in an unresolved dilemma; that is, since India confronts two

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

adversaries (China and Pakistan) and is not clear whether the deterrent posture which is credible towards China is minimum towards Pakistan. In other words, India's deterrent forces may not be minimum towards Pakistan in a number that is credible towards China. This pulls Pakistan unnecessarily into a vicious cycle of arms race.

This policy shift would have implications for minimum deterrence in South Asia. Pakistan, for example, could have a reappraisal in its perception of minimum deterrence and develop its deterrent forces at least at the parity level, if not weapon-to-weapon. It could depart from minimum credible deterrence to a more proposed "sufficient" and/ or "offensive deterrent posture".⁴⁶ This would then have implications for non-proliferation efforts by the non-proliferation regime in the South Asian region. The arms race could continue with no short term possibility for the establishment of an arms control regime, much needed in the South Asian region to restrain the arms race and sustain strategic stability between the nuclear adversaries. The minimum deterrence conceived in this study thus depends on the states' nuclear policy transformation, formulation, and execution.

Notes & References

¹ For interesting account on India's nuclear, see Ashley Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal*, (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001); George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Rajesh Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2006); Bharat Karnad, *India's Nuclear Policy*, (Westport CT: Praeger, 2008); K. Sundarji, *Blind Men of Hindustan: India-Pak Nuclear War*, (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1993).

² Often time, policy, strategy, and doctrine are used randomly in the literature. However, there is a difference between these words; that is, *nuclear policy* stands for the highest and dominant layer, for achieving economic, political, and military goals through the development and future use of nuclear forces, *nuclear strategy* deals largely with the guidelines, constructions, and preparations for the future use of nuclear forces, and *nuclear doctrine* is the basic layout of the operational uses of nuclear forces. For interesting account on this, see Jianqun Teng, "A New Look at China's Nuclear Policy," In *Nuclear Doctrines and Strategies: National Policies and International Security*, ed. Mark Fitzpatrick, Alexander Nikitin, Sergey Oznobishchev, (Oxford: IOS Publishers, 2008), 79-86.

³ The "known knowns" is famously quoted by the United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who quoted in answering one of the questions during a US Department of Defense News Briefing in February 2002. The Rumsfeld quotation in full is: "Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to

me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns- the ones we don't know we don't know." Available at: www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/936753.Donald_Rumsfeld (accessed on April 28, 2014).

- ⁴ For an interesting and detailed account on essentials of minimum deterrence, see Rajesh Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2006); Also, see: Zafar Khan, *Pakistan's Nuclear Policy: a Minimum Credible Deterrence*, (London: Routledge, 2014) (*forthcoming*).
- ⁵ For an interesting account of this perspective, see: P.M. S. Blackett, "A Critique of Defence Thinking," *Survival* 3, no.3 (1961): 126-134. Also: Blackett, *Studies of War: Nuclear and Conventional*, (London: Oliver & Boyd Publications, 1962); Anthony Buzzard, "Massive Retaliation and Graduated Deterrence," *World Politics* 8, no. 2 (1956): 228-237. ; Buzzard, "Defence, Disarmament & Christian Decision," *Survival* 3, no. 5 (1961): 207-219. ; Buzzard, John Slessor & Richard Lowenthal, "The H-Bomb: Massive Retaliation or Graduated Deterrence," *International Affairs* 32, no. 2 (1956): 148-165.
- ⁶ Peter Gizewski, *Minimum Nuclear Deterrence in a New World Order*, Aurora Papers, 24, (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Global Security, 1994), 2.
- ⁷ Gizewski, *Minimum Nuclear Deterrence in a New World Order*, 2-3.
- ⁸ Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution*, (CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); John C, Hopkins & Weixing Hu, ed.s, *Strategic Views from the Second Tier: The Nuclear Weapons Policies of France, Britain, and China* (London: New Brunswick, 1995).
- ⁹ Rajesh Rajagopalan, *Second Strike: Arguments about Nuclear War in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Viking, 2005), 89-106.
- ¹⁰ Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*; Basrur, "Nuclear Deterrence Thinking in Pakistan," In *International Relations Theory and South Asia*, ed. E. Sridharan, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107.
- ¹¹ There is a difference between the two terms "minimum deterrence" and "minimum credible deterrence." Although the element of minimum (representing a small and low number) exists within both types of deterrence –and both require survivability and credibility in terms of deterrence –minimum credible deterrence, as conceived in this study, is more ambiguous, remains dynamic, and changes in accordance with the region's changed/changing environment. Yet, the number of deterrent forces in both of these types cannot be determined as it varies from one nuclear weapons state to another. In other words, MD is much clearer and less ambiguous in terms of the number of the nuclear forces than MCD. In this study, MD and MCD are dealt in relation to numbers of the nuclear forces. MCD may represent a more ambiguous and non-fixed number whilst MD could be for a nearly fixed and less ambiguous number.
- ¹² Robert Oppenheimer, "American Weapons and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 31 (July 1953): 529.

*Emerging Shifts in India's Nuclear Policy: Implications for
Minimum Deterrence in South Asia*

- ¹³ Viping Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," *Washington Quarterly* (Summer 2013): 144.
- ¹⁴ Authors' interview with Zafar Ali working officer in Strategic Plans Division Pakistan, September 2012.
- ¹⁵ See "Pakistan's 21st Century Naval Modernization Program," (May 15, 2012), Available at: <http://pakdefenceunit.wordpress.com/2012/05/15/pakistans-21st-century-naval-modernisation-programme-indian-nuclear-submarine-programme/> (accessed on June 21, 2012).
- ¹⁶ See "India's nuclear submarine to trigger arms race: Pakistan to maintain its minimum deterrence," available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjSm6IKknbc&feature=BFa&list=PLB5EBDDD31ACB3152> (accessed on June 22, 2012).
- ¹⁷ Interview with Maria Sultan, September 2012.
- ¹⁸ For details, see "Nuclear Pakistan: Ten Years On", *Margalla Paper* (2008), Special ed. Available at: www.ndu.edu.pk/publications/pub_margalla2008_se.php (accessed on June 22, 2012).
- ¹⁹ Zafar Khan, "The Conceptual Essentials of Minimum: Explaining Pakistan's Rationale of Minimum Deterrence," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2014) (forthcoming).
- ²⁰ Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," 146.
- ²¹ See Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security*, 44.
- ²² See Prime Minister's office of India, "Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews".
- ²³ See Scott Sagan, "The Evolution of Pakistani and Indian Nuclear doctrine," In *Inside Nuclear South Asia*, ed. Scott D. Sagan. (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 219-264.
- ²⁴ See "India asks Pakistan to Accept "no-first use pact," *The Independent* (Dhaka), July 09, 1998.
- ²⁵ Kanti Bajpai, "India's Nuclear Posture after Pokhran II," *International Studies* 37, no. 4 (2000): 1-31.
- ²⁶ Abdul Sattar, Zulfiqar Ali Khan and Agha Shahi, "Securing the Nuclear Peace," *The News* (October 05, 1999).
- ²⁷ Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," 151.
- ²⁸ Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," 151.
- ²⁹ Swaran Singh, "India's Nuclear Doctrine: Ten Years since the Kargil Conflict," In *The Politics of Nuclear Weapons in South Asia*, ed. Bhumitra Chakma. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 57-74.
- ³⁰ Scott D. Sagan, "The Case for No First Use," *Survival* 51, no. 3 (2009): 175-176.
- ³¹ For an interesting take on this, see: Paul Kapur, "Ten Years of Instability in a Nuclear South Asia," *International Security* 33, no. 2(Fall 2008): 90; Walter C. Ladwig, "A Cold Start for Hot Wars? The Indian Army's New Limited War Doctrine," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 160; Zafar Khan, "Cold Start Doctrine: The Conventional Challenge to South Asian Stability," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no.3 (2012): 577-594.

-
- ³² See, for example, Malik Qasim Mustafa, "The Indo-US Nuclear Deal: an Overview of IAEA Safeguards and Nuclear Trade with NSG," *Strategic Studies* (December 2008), http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1302590902_40117284.pdf (accessed on April 30, 2014).
- ³³ Maleeha Lodhi, "FMCT and Strategic Stability," *The News International* (January 26, 2010).
- ³⁴ Adil Sultan, "Fissile Material Treaty: Prospects and Challenges," (2011 Research Paper No. 49), <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?lng=en&id=151243> (accessed March 24, 2013); Tariq Osman Hyder, "FMCT: Facts and Fiction," *The News* (March 28, 2012).
- ³⁵ See NCA concluding statements on the FMCT, "NCA Rules out Signing of Treaty on N-Materials," *Dawn* (December 15, 2010), <http://dawn.com/2010/12/15/nca-rules-out-signing-of-treaty-on-n-material-2/>, March 24, 2013.
- ³⁶ Andrea Berger, "Finding the Right Home for FMCT Talks," *Arms Control Today* (October 2012).
- ³⁷ A Pakistani representative stated at the February 2010 Conference on Disarmament that, "along with the commitments to build up its [India's] strategic and conventional capabilities, it has encouraged its hegemonic ambitions, which are aimed at charting a course of dangerous adventurism whose consequences can both be unintended and uncontrollable....Pakistan would not move forward with negotiations on the FMCT, and by extension, it would continue to expand its stockpiling of fissile material." See, for example: Andrew Bast, "Pakistan's Nuclear Calculus," *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2011): 79.
- ³⁸ Charles D. Ferguson, "Reshaping the US-Indian Nuclear Deal to Lessen the Non-Proliferation Losses," *Arms Control Today* (April 2008), available at: <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/2780> (accessed on April 27, 2014).
- ³⁹ See, Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Global Nuclear Weapons Inventories, 1945-2013," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (September 2013), available at: <http://thebulletin.org/2013/september/global-nuclear-weapons-inventories-1945-2013> (accessed on April 27, 2014).
- ⁴⁰ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "Future of FMCT: Assessing the Prospects and Constraints," (2010), Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1299560158_80128402.pdf (accessed May 11, 2012).
- ⁴¹ Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal*, 367.
- ⁴² Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," 148.
- ⁴³ Rajat Pandit, "Agni-V to be Tested Twice this Year, Could be Inducted by 2015," *Times of India*, (June 29, 2013).
- ⁴⁴ Shiv Aroor, "New Chief of India's Military Research Complex Reveals Brave New Mandate," *India Today*, (July 03, 2013).
- ⁴⁵ Narang, "Five Myths about India's Nuclear Posture," p. 148.
- ⁴⁶ *Nuclear Pakistan: Strategic Dimensions*, edited by Zulfqar Khan, (London: Oxford University Press, 2011).