



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

India Rethinking of its No First Use (NFU) Policy: Implications for South Asian Strategic Stability

Malik Qasim Mustafa, Senior Research Fellow, ISSI

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To safeguard national security interests, several states have developed nuclear weapons capabilities and have devised their nuclear policies and doctrines to deter adversaries. Due to their threat perceptions, and due to the catastrophic consequences of use of nuclear weapons, nuclear weapon states have adopted different nuclear weapon use policies, including the defensive use or the No First Use (NFU) policies. China was the first one who adopted the NFU policy in 1964 and still following it.



In the South Asian context, in 1999, when India initially outlined its draft nuclear doctrine of Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) it adopted a NFU policy. India highlighted that it has the right to respond with countermeasures against any threat of use of nuclear weapons, and can even punitively retaliate with nuclear weapons to, “inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor,” if India or its forces are attacked with nuclear weapons.¹ Later on in 2003, India modified its NFU policy and made it more ambiguous and vague when the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) declared that in an event of a biological and chemical attack against India or its forces anywhere, it would retaliate with nuclear weapons.²

Since then, the Indian officials and nuclear experts have been debating to review India’s CMD doctrine and criticising effectiveness of its NFU policy. Even before the 2014 Indian Elections, exploiting this criticism as an opportunity, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also made a commitment in its Party Manifesto to review and update Indian CMD doctrine with existing realities.³ Indian officials and experts have also started to raise concerns on India’s credibility of massive retaliation response and on illogical use of nuclear weapons against chemical or biological attack.⁴ With reference to Pakistan especially, they are now considering first use or pre-emptive strike to totally deny Pakistan any chance of using nuclear weapons. In an apparent shift, the Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar had stated that a written-down policy on the use of nuclear weapons would mean giving away strength, and why India should bind itself to a no first use policy.⁵

Following this position, nuclear experts have started to interpret a shift in Indian nuclear doctrine. More recently on March 20, 2017, Professor Vipin Narang from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in an international nuclear policy conference organised by Carnegie, questioned the credibility of India's massive counter-value retaliation against Pakistan's tactical nuclear strike, and hinted at a pre-emptive nuclear counterforce strike by India.⁶ He suggests that there is increasing evidence that India will not allow Pakistan to hit first. India may pre-empt with a full 'comprehensive counterforce strike' that attempts to completely disarm Pakistan of its nuclear weapons. Narang summed it up as a 'decoupling' of Indian nuclear strategy between China and Pakistan with an increased force requirement to credibly threaten assured retaliation against China and aggressive strategies like escalation dominance or a 'splendid first strike' against Pakistan.⁷

Other Indian experts have also started to favour Narang's argument of a pre-emptive nuclear counterforce strike by India. For example, Shashank Joshi stated that "If Pakistan goes first, and India goes second, why should India leave Pakistan with the ability to go third? Indeed, if Pakistan is trying to go first, why doesn't India simply slip in first? These twin ideas, striking first and aiming at the enemy's nuclear weapons rather than his cities, are intuitive and alluring."⁸ This reflects that India is not willing to fully adhere to its 2003 NFU policy and would soon shift away from it. If India makes such strategic adjustments, it will lose the element of ambiguity and flexibility, which will make the South Asian strategic environment more dangerous and any miscalculation could lead to a nuclear catastrophe.

For Pakistani nuclear experts and the strategic community, recent reports that India is about to rethink, reconsider, reinterpret or shift away from NFU policy are not much of a surprise. They already knew that India had failed to maintain a strict NFU policy since 2003. As India already wanted to punish Pakistan through a limited war, and as a result, without taking into account deterrence stability dynamics, it has been constantly advancing its nuclear weapons capability, its missile programme and the development of the naval leg of its nuclear triad. India is also investing heavily on its military modernization drive. Whereas Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability is purely defensive and aimed at deterring India from any kind of aggression against Pakistan. It deliberately kept its nuclear use option and nuclear threshold ambiguous. Therefore, Pakistan's non-adherence to the NFU policy has been solely aimed at deterring India with a threat of nuclear retaliation. One can argue that as a result of non-adherence to the NFU policy and despite of a conventional asymmetry vis-a-vis India, India never crossed Pakistan's nuclear redlines. The first-use policy worked in Pakistan's favour during the 2001-2002 military standoff and in the 2008 Mumbai incident.

Pakistan has always been sceptical of Indian NFU policy and its ambitions towards it. Therefore, Pakistan has been deliberately maintaining a policy of ambiguity and flexibility. It has always succeeded in maintaining a stable deterrence with an aim to restoring strategic balance in the South Asia region. However, the emerging Indian strategic adjustment by deviating from NFU could undermine deterrence stability in the region, which will bring severe implications for South Asian strategic stability. It will generate and open ended nuclear arms race between Indian and Pakistan. It will increase nuclear forces alert and readiness status on both sides. It will enhance the chances of accidental or unauthorised use from both side, and any miscalculations will provide no time and chance to avoid a nuclear exchange between Indian and Pakistan.

Under this new notion of a pre-emptive counterforce strike, disarming Pakistan completely is practically not possible especially after the successful test of Babur-3, a Submarine Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) which has ensured Pakistan's second strike capability and completed its nuclear triad. However, this policy shift from India will compel Pakistan to increase its nuclear arsenals and enhance its survivability against India's first strike and to retaliate massively. Therefore, any miscalculation on the Indian part will bring more destruction on its side too. India should make sensible and responsible policy choices which should be aimed at bringing lasting peace and promote cooperation in the South Asian region. An open-ended nuclear arm race between India and Pakistan will work against the prosperity and human development of this region. A blind ignorance of the dynamics of strategic stability in South Asia would be equally damaging for India and for the rest of the South Asian region. Therefore, a stable deterrent relationship between India and Pakistan is prerequisite for peace in South Asia.

Notes and References

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- ⁵ "Why Bind ourselves to 'No First Use Policy', Says Defence Minister Parrikar on India's Nuclear Doctrine," *The Times of India*, November 10, 2016, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Having-a-stated-nuclear-policy-means-giving-away-strength-says-Parrikar/articleshow/55357107.cms>.

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- ⁶ Remarks by Vipin Narang, “Plenary: Beyond the Nuclear Threshold: Causes and Consequences of First Use” at Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference Washington, DC, March 20, 2017, <https://fbfy83yid9j1dqsev3zq0w8n-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Vipin-Narang-Remarks-Carnegie-Nukefest-2017.pdf>
- ⁷ Ibid.
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