



INDIA'S NO FIRST USE: SIGNALLING OR A POLICY SHIFT?

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh made a statement on India's No First Use (NFU) policy on August 16, 2019 which has elicited a reaction from Pakistan and ignited a debate on India's NFU policy. Singh spoke on the occasion of the first death anniversary of former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee saying that the NFU policy has been adhered to so far but, "What happens in the future depends on the circumstances."¹

He later also made the same statement on Twitter. While this may not be a formal policy change, it certainly is a not so veiled threat from India. The Defense Minister's statement comes at a time when tensions are high between the two nuclear armed neighbors over India's move to revoke autonomy of Indian Occupied Kashmir region which is disputed and two wars have been fought over the issue. Pakistan has taken the signalling over the NFU seriously which has serious implications for its nuclear strategy.

Pakistan made a strong and clear statement on August 16. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in a press conference said, "The substance and timing of the Indian defense minister's statement is highly unfortunate and reflective of India's irresponsible and belligerent behavior. It further exposes the pretence of their no first use policy to which we have never accorded any credence." He further pointed out that India's, "'No first use' pledge is non-verifiable

¹ "'No First Use' of nukes policy is open to review: Rajnath Singh," *The Times of India*, August 17, 2019, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/no-first-use-of-nukes-policy-is-open-to-review-rajnath/articleshow/70707921.cms

and cannot be taken at face value. Especially when development of offensive capabilities and force postures belie such claims."² On Twitter, he termed this as "damning reminder of India's unbridled thirst for violence."³ This is by far the strongest and instantaneous statements from Pakistan and indicates that it has taken India's threatening tone very seriously.

This has not been the first time where doubts have been cast at India's NFU policy. India's draft nuclear doctrine of 1999 clearly stated that the weapons would be used for retaliation only: "any nuclear attack on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons." And, "India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail."⁴ This is a clear NFU pledge by India. Its official nuclear doctrine of January 2003 adds one more condition that India will use nuclear weapons to retaliate against any biological and chemical weapons attack as well.⁵ This document already takes India out of the strict NFU ambit.

Over the years, statements by Indian officials and debates in academic circles have also cast serious doubts over Indian adherence to NFU in principle and in practice. In 2010, India's National Security Advisor at the time, Shivshankar Menon said that the doctrine advocates NFU against non-nuclear weapon states implying that use of nuclear weapons was an option against nuclear weapon states.⁶ In 2016, the then Defense Minister Manohar Prakar questioned, "Why do lots of people say that India is for no first use? Why should I bind myself?"⁷ Also, an eminent Indian academic, Vipin Narang, spoke at a conference at Carnegie in 2017 saying that there is increasing evidence that India would not allow Pakistan to go first. He went as far as discussing the prospects of an Indian pre-emptive nuclear strike against Pakistan.⁸ Herein lies the real danger from the Indian thinking - a move away from NFU towards a policy of pre-emption against Pakistan. There is nothing new in Indian dubious policy vis a vis NFU.

² "India's statement regarding 'no first use' policy on nuclear weapons is irresponsible: foreign minister," *Dawn*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1499826>

³ Pakistan's FM terms Indian defence Minister's statement a reminder of thirst for violence," *Geo News*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/245075-queeshi-terms-indian-defence-ministers-statement-a-reminder-of-thirst-for-violence>

⁴ "India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine," Article 2. 3(b) and 2.4 August 1999, *Arms Control Today*, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1999-07/indias-draft-nuclear-doctrine>

⁵ "India's Nuclear Doctrine," Article 2 (VI), <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/20131/The+Cabinet+Committee+on+Security+Reviews+operationalization+of+Indias+Nuclear+Doctrine>

⁶ Shivshankar Menon, "Speech by NSA Shivshankar Menon at NDC on 'The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs'" (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, October 21, 2010), https://www.mea.gov.in/SpeechesStatements.htm?dtl/798/Speech_by_NSA_Shri_Shivshankar_Menon_at_NDC_on_The_Role_of_Force_in_Strategic_Affairs.

⁷ "Why bind ourselves to 'no first use' policy, says Manohar Parrikar on India's nuke policy", *Economic Times*, November 12, 2016.

⁸ For details of the discussion see Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "No First Use and India's Changing Nuclear Policy," *Hilal*, May 2017.

However, Defense Minister Singh's NFU statement is problematic at two levels - it is belligerent and irresponsible. It is belligerent because the particular timing of the statement seems highly calculated as it comes in the wake of India's move to abolish Kashmir's special status by revoking Article 370 and 35A. Tensions between the nuclear armed India and Pakistan are running high and there is outrage in Pakistan and the world over the Kashmir issue which has been a contentious issue between the two countries for 70 years. India and Pakistan have fought two wars over the issue. Pakistan has taken the issue to the United Nations Security Council and has announced that it will take it to International Court of Justice as well. There have been protests over India's Kashmir move within Pakistan and internationally. Therefore, India's timing over its remarks on NFU are significant and an effort by New Delhi to threaten Pakistan to back off the issue that has been at the root of hostilities between the two countries since their inception. It is highly belligerent behavior on India's part to threaten first use of nuclear weapons over the issue of Kashmir, especially where it has been the aggressor, by terminating the autonomy of Kashmir which is a disputed state.

India's move from NFU to a strategy of a pre-emption against Pakistan is highly irresponsible. Research suggests that India seems to be developing a nuclear arsenal that goes beyond its policy of credible deterrence and NFU policy. Vipin Narang and Christopher Clary, two scholars that focus on South Asia argue that pronouncements from former Indian defense officials and corresponding pursuit of enhanced nuclear capabilities reveal a strategy of pre-emptive counterforce strike against Pakistan in a crisis.⁹ Others also suggest that India may well be the first to initiate a nuclear attack in times of crisis.¹⁰ India has been investing in new precision weaponry, as well as space-based and ground-based surveillance, intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities that would support any move towards first use and pre-emption.

This has a number of implications for Pakistan's security and its nuclear strategy. A move towards pre-emption is very dangerous in a volatile nuclear theatre like South Asia. It would accelerate an arms race in the region and will necessitate adjustment by Pakistan to its force postures and doctrine. In effect, pre-emptive thinking on the part of India means that weapons have to be mated or at least increase their readiness status bringing with it the risks of accidental and unauthorized use. It would also create pre-emptive tendencies in Pakistan since it would face the lose-it-or-use-it dilemma. This would make the South Asian nuclear theatre highly unstable and dangerous.

⁹ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Winter 2018/19)

¹⁰ 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, Issue. 1, 2018.

Put in the context of Indian heavy conventional build-up, operationalizing of its naval nuclear capabilities where it already has a number of nuclear powered submarines capable of launching a multitude of nuclear weapons, and an operational Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system, Pakistan has reasons for great concern. In effect, India can potentially launch a pre-emptive strike against Pakistan, secure in the knowledge that it would be protected against any counter-strike by its missile defense system. The danger here is that while the BMD may not provide complete protection against attacking missiles, it creates a false sense of security in the Indian decision makers that would make them act with aggression in a crisis.

It would serve Pakistan well to keep a close watch on Indian nuclear policy and adjust its posture to cater for both an abandoning of NFU by India and possible pre-emptive tendencies. Pakistan has the option to use mobility, dispersion and camouflage to increase survivability of its nuclear force. It has diversified its delivery systems which support a mix of short and medium range missiles, developed Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology, as well as cruise missiles. It has already developed significant sea-based nuclear assets that would ensure a second-strike capability. It has tested its Submarine Launched Cruise Missile, Babur 3, in 2017, that it plans to deploy on its diesel powered Agosta submarines. This second-strike capability ensures that not all of Pakistan's nuclear assets are destroyed in a nuclear first strike.

Revoking of the special status of Kashmir, statements which threaten abandoning of NFU, and a move towards conventional and nuclear pre-emption reflect belligerent and irresponsible behavior. They are indications of an extremist, aggressive turn in India's foreign and security policy. This trend has intensified with an extremist government in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi that promotes a Hindutva ideology. It promises yet more conflict, instability and arms racing tendencies in the conflict-prone South Asian region. India has brought South Asia to a very dangerous impasse in its pursuit of regional hegemony and great power status.

Besides adjusting its nuclear posture and its foreign policy options, Pakistan needs to build maximum international pressure on India that highlights its aggressive posture and its dangerous nuclear policies. India also needs to realize that pronouncement like the one made by Rajnath Singh are counterproductive for India, tarnishing its carefully cultivated image of a "responsible nuclear state." The world needs to see that India's NFU turn is, just as the Pakistani Foreign Minister iterated, "shocking and irresponsible."