

Revision of India's Nuclear Doctrine

Repercussions on South Asian Crisis Stability

SITAKANTA MISHRA

An authoritative revision of India's nuclear doctrine, which was formulated in 1999 and operationalized in 2003, is long overdue. In its 2014 election manifesto, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pledged to design an "independent strategic nuclear programme" and "revise and update" India's nuclear doctrine, which prompted a debate over the change and continuity of India's "no-first-use" (NFU) posture.¹ However, neither Prime Minister Narendra Modi nor the BJP has ever revisited that pledge or taken any initiative to act upon it. Even in the 2019 BJP election manifesto, there is no mention of nuclear doctrine revision or Indian nuclear weapons policy whatsoever. Is this BJP's strategic silence before it resorts to a revision, or was the party's pledge in 2014 mere election rhetoric? Sporadic public pronouncements by the political and bureaucratic leaders, in the recent past, regarding the imperatives of doctrinal revision or shift have generated enormous anxieties in the South Asian strategic discourse, giving rise to varied interpretations of India's likely pathways to nuclear use. Scholars have gone to the extent of viewing India's "nuclear restraint less certain" today for the "development of a suite of capabilities and statements . . . that appear inconsistent with its professed strategy of minimum deterrence."²

The issue at hand gives rise to many intricate questions on the regional geostrategic discourse. Will India shift its current doctrinal position from NFU of nuclear weapons to first-use, and if so, why? Is the current doctrinal posture not flexible enough to meet any contingency? Do Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) create strategic paralysis in India, for which New Delhi feels compelled to acquire nuclear counterforce options? Is development of a suite of capabilities like diverse and more delivery systems, missile defense, and surveillance platforms indicative of "India's conscious pursuit of more flexible options beyond counter value targeting?" If so, what are the implications for deterrence stability in South Asia? Will India not use the conventional forces at its disposal to resist Pakistan rather than resorting to using nuclear weapons first? Or, will India resort to a preemptive nuclear strike at once to disallow Pakistan the use of nuclear weapons first?

This study delves into the nuances in vogue in the region in the contemporary strategic thinking surrounding the Indo-Pakistan nuclear discourse and the repercussions of doctrinal shifts in nuclear-use strategy regarding deterrence stability.

Doctrinal Shift Advocacy

The basic premise of the debate on doctrinal revision of India's nuclear weapons policy is the assumed illogicality and inadequacy of the NFU posture to deter an adversary who adheres to a first-use posture. Similar debate and doubt can be traced to the post-Pokhran II years,³ when nuclear scientist Krishnamurthy Sathnam, who was part of India's nuclear weapons program, said that the 1998 nuclear test had fizzled out with a yield "much lower than what was claimed."⁴ Thereafter, many in India criticized the country's self-imposed moratorium on further nuclear tests. As India has reluctantly acquired nuclear weapons, a sense of moral responsibility is embedded in its nuclear-use policy. Anecdotally the original draft doctrine prepared by National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) prescribed a first-use posture and punitive retaliation that was replaced with a NFU and massive retaliation posture at the insistence of the then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Other provisions like NFU, negative security assurance, disarmament goals, and declaring nuclear weapons as political weapons for deterrence are only symbolic of India's nuclear morality.

Subsequently, the basic premise of the debate on doctrinal revision has widened to include the aggressive posture of India's adversary. Nowadays, a realist-pragmatic faction appears to have overshadowed the idealistic-moralistic camp in India's strategic enclave who long propagated nuclear restraint during the post-Vajpayee decades. Therefore, India's usual value-laden "reputational commitment" strategies, postures, and policies are under realists' scrutiny now. The advocacy to reserve the nuclear first-strike option is part of this realistic-pragmatist drive that is unfolding and engulfing India's strategic discourse today. This trend is visible if one connects the dots of former Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar's assertions as portrayed in former National Security Advisor (NSA) Shivshankar Menon's 2016 book, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy*. In addition to the usual fringe voices within India's strategic enclave, the highest officials in the government have increasingly shown their intention to move away from the idealistic-moralistic narrative. Retired bureaucrats and military officials have gradually become vocal in questioning the rationale behind India's self-imposed restraints.

However, these voices are "more likely a warning, than an indication of shifts. But it is difficult to judge whether former officials are outlining their personal views or reflecting an internal debate when they write."⁵ Moreover, the highest political leadership is yet to come to terms with the proposed shift and readily agree to leave behind the idealistic-moralistic position. This is discernible from Rajnath Singh, the then-BJP president, and subsequently Narendra Modi, the prime ministerial candidate, clarified that no review of NFU was planned and "No

first use was a great initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee - there is no compromise on that. We are very clear. No first use is a reflection of our cultural inheritance.”⁶ In an April 2014 interview, Modi clearly stated, “No first use was a great initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee—there is no compromise on that. We are very clear. [It] is a reflection of our cultural inheritance.”⁷ Subsequently, as prime minister, in a meeting in Japan in August 2014, Modi said that “there is a tradition of national consensus and continuity on such issues. I can tell you that currently, we are not taking any initiative for a review of our nuclear doctrine.”⁸ Ever since, Prime Minister Modi has neither spoken a word on nor taken up the issue of revision of nuclear doctrine during the last five years. Interestingly, the BJP has learned of late that it is imprudent to bloviate on matters of nuclear strategy as a political gimmick; in its 2019 election manifesto, the party completely skipped any mention of a determination (*sankalp*) to shift India’s nuclear posture—unlike its 2014 manifesto.



Figure 1. Modi and Trudeau. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets with his Canadian counterpart, Justin Trudeau, at the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC.

Nuclear Decisions in Retrospect

In India, political leaders, especially the prime minister, play more determining roles than the political party or party members in shaping India’s nuclear weapons policy. In other words, in nuclear matters, the views of the leadership of the party are paramount over the aggregate views of other members of the party. Indian party leaders and/or prime ministers have taken important nuclear decisions amid

unique circumstance in the past. Today have those who champion a doctrinal shift engaged in introspection as to whether any such unique situation has arrived?

For example, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's decision not to foreclose India's nuclear weapons option and authorization of the subterranean nuclear explosion program was the result of intensive pressure from the Congress Party and opposition party members in the wake of the Chinese nuclear tests in 1964. Shastri's nuclear decisions were a manifestation of his weak position in the Congress Party and his consequent strategy to manage party members' resentment. Similarly, other Congress prime ministers like Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao, and Manmohan Singh have equally taken important decisions concerning nuclear weapon program in unique political contexts. By the time Mrs. Gandhi became prime minister, the split between "pro-bomb" and "no-bomb" factions in her party was wide. Her rival, Morarji Desai, the deputy prime minister, was a staunch supporter of the no-bomb policy; whereas, K. C. Pant, a young Congress leader at the time, argued vociferously in favor of the bomb. Mrs. Gandhi was more concerned about the stabilization of her leadership in the Congress Party and her government. Therefore, she avoided the liabilities of either embracing nuclear weapons or rejecting the option completely. She did not pursue the nuclear issue during her first term, focusing instead on consolidating her position within the Congress Party and in the national political scene. However, during her second term as prime minister, Mrs. Gandhi had absolute faith in and control over her party. Moreover, the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and her decisive action won her the identity of a "strong" leader. It is believed that during this time she gave the green light for the first nuclear explosion.

The Congress Party under the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi won 415 out of total 542 Lok Sabha seats in the 1984. From 1983 to 1985, Mr. Gandhi was also the president of the Congress Party. Using his image as a young dynamic leader with the backing of 49 percent of electorate, he advocated his proposal for the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2010 in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Had his proposal been seriously considered, Gandhi could have given a different tilt to India's nuclear weapons program. Realizing the difficulty in the nuclear disarmament initiative, he constituted a committee (following the suggestion of ADM Radhakrishna Hariram Tahiliani, his Chief of the Naval Staff) consisting of A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Rajagopala Chidambaram, Gen Krishnaswamy Sunderji (Chief of Staff of the Indian Army), VADM K. K. Nayyar, and Air Marshal Johnny Green. The committee produced a report saying a minimal credible deterrent of about 100 warheads could be developed in about seven years and would cost about INR 70 billion.⁹

Prime Ministers Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh are two distinguished Congress Party leaders whose nuclear policy decisions were equally important. After a long spell of Gandhi family leadership, Narasimha Rao took over the leadership of the Congress Party (1992–97) and the government. The strong tendency among various centrist parties to unite together to not allow “fundamentalist” parties like the BJP to come to power seemed to have helped Rao to manage his coalition government. However, by Rao’s term the internal divide between pro-bomb and no-bomb factions had waned. Instead, the concern was whether any government could test and manage the wrath of the world community. From where Rao got the confidence to dare order for nuclear test in 1995, which was caught by US satellite, is a matter of speculation. On the other hand, Manmohan Singh pursued a policy of Indo-US civil nuclear cooperation for which he had to face a “no-confidence motion” in Lok Sabha, proving United Progressive Alliance coalition government’s political mandate.¹⁰ Though Indo-US nuclear cooperation is more about India’s nuclear energy program, it nevertheless circumscribed India’s option to conduct future nuclear weapons tests.

If this history is any guide, it is obvious that Modi did not unfold the nuclear weapons issue during his first term as prime minister. As a new leader in national-level politics in 2014, Modi’s priority was to consolidate his position within his party and national politics, just as his predecessors had before him. Having won reelection this year, Modi could undertake some decision on nuclear weapons policy—probably revisiting nuclear doctrine but not necessarily altering the NFU posture. As the debate has resurfaced in political circles now and the BJP has pledged a reexamination of the doctrine previously, one can expect that the doctrine will go through an official scrutiny sooner or later even though the party’s 2019 election manifesto is silent on this matter.

Interestingly, even during the tension between India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the Spring 2019 Pulwama terror attack in Jammu & Kashmir and India’s consequent surgical strike against terrorist camps in Balakot, Pakistan, neither the BJP nor its leaders have raised India’s nuclear weapons strategy. Only Prime Minister Modi, in his election speech in Barmer, Rajasthan, said that India’s nuclear button was not kept to be used for Diwali.¹¹ Therefore, it is intriguing to examine why the party that takes pride in bloviating on India’s nuclear weapons preparedness has backpedaled on its pledge to revise the country’s nuclear stance. Is this the BJP’s strategic silence before it resorts to a revision, or was the party’s 2014 pledge to review and revise India’s nuclear doctrine mere election rhetoric?

Imperatives of Doctrinal Revision

The felt need and consequent debate for a doctrinal revision did not actually start with the BJP's pledge in 2014. Rather the NSAB reportedly first pronounced this imperative in 2003, suggesting in its *National Security Review* report that the government overturn the NFU policy in light of the history of the previous four years.¹² Initially, the NSAB had supported the NFU policy, but by the board's third report, members argued for revision, because India was the only nuclear weapon state (NWS) committed to a NFU policy. Ever since, the status of the NSAB recommendation and consequent government action, if any, is unknown.

A decade later, in its 2014 election manifesto, the BJP made the issue of reviewing India's nuclear posture a priority, accusing the sitting Congress government of frittering away "the strategic gains acquired by India during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee regime on the nuclear programme."¹³ Therefore, the BJP pledged to: "Study in detail India's nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to *challenges of current times*. Maintain a credible minimum deterrent that is in tune with changing geostatic realities. Invest in India's indigenous Thorium Technology Programme."¹⁴

The BJP's allegation against Congress of "frittering away" the strategic gains India accrued during Vajpayee government is debatable. The crowning achievement during the one decade of the Congress government (2004–2014) was the Indo-US nuclear deal that saw India emerge from being considered a rogue nuclear state to being perceived as a legitimate multialigned, nuclear power. This was achieved without compromising India's nuclear weapons capability. India also passed the stringent Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act in 2010. On the strategic front, during this period, the fielding of the Agni-V missile, with a range of approximately 5,000 km, extended India's nuclear delivery capability to China. Additionally, production of the third leg of India's nuclear deterrent was initiated: *Arihant*, India's first indigenously built nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine. The ballistic missile defense and multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles programs also advanced during this time. Considering all these, the report card of the UPA's handling of strategic matters seems impressive, and Western scholars have remarked upon the fact that India's current missile modernization has exceeded what is necessary for a minimum credible deterrence.¹⁵ Therefore, the BJP's remarks regarding the previous Congress-led governments' lack of performance on the nuclear weapons issue is rather disingenuous, says Chengappa.¹⁶ In fact, the Vajpayee government would not have been able to order the 1998 nuclear tests just months after his second tenure had the previous Congress government not kept India's nuclear option in a state of readiness.

Though the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance coalition government self-imposed a test moratorium in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests, in the BJP's view the Indo-US nuclear deal has curtailed, under US pressure, India's sovereign right to perpetually test. This is probably what the BJP refers to when it claims Congress "frittered away" India's strategic gains.

With Pakistan's introduction of TNWs in the South Asian strategic theater, and with Islamabad reserving a first-use nuclear option, some have argued that the nuclear threshold in South Asia has been significantly lowered. In addition to Pakistan's newly developed capabilities, the China-Pakistan strategic nexus is another of the "changing geostatic realities" and "challenges of current times" with which India needs to contend. Undoubtedly, India has to take stock of the new security environment and readjust, if required, its nuclear strategy. That is a valid exercise for any government; therefore, a revision of India's nuclear doctrine is long overdue. In fact, some Western scholars view India's current nuclear doctrine as archaic, drawing similarities with the US doctrine of "massive retaliation" from the 1950s.

The Plausible Scenarios

One can assume that an authoritative revision of India's nuclear doctrine will be undertaken sooner rather than later. With Narendra Modi's reelection and the strengthening of his position within the party and on national political scene, it would not be unrealistic to assume that during his second term as prime minister he is likely to initiate such an undertaking. One can only speculate at this juncture what the upshots of such an endeavor will be. However, based on available information the following are plausible outcomes.

First, even if the doctrine is officially revisited, decision makers may opt not to make significant alterations to the provisions, keeping in mind the doctrine's wide acceptability today and India's Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership aspirations. Most probably, Modi's new government may authorize the NSAB to debate alternative doctrinal options and do nothing thereafter. The debate would, in itself, fulfill election promises to revisit the issues, and the doctrine in its current form corroborates India's stature as a "responsible state." A shift toward a first-use posture would raise eyebrows, hampering New Delhi's prospects for NSG membership. Furthermore, the doctrine in its current form seems to have met its objectives. The criticisms advanced against the current doctrinal posture, and consequent suggestion to reserve the first-use option, are primarily based on the notion that India should not foreclose its options when a hostile neighbor with a first-use posture resorts to nuclear brinkmanship at the slightest pretext. One such critic, India's former defense minister, Manohar Parrikar, has advocated for a change in India's posture from NFU to "Not-Use-Irresponsibly."¹⁷ However, one must pon-

der what incentive India would provide to Pakistan in terms of maintaining strategic stability in South Asia if New Delhi undertakes such a shift.

Meanwhile, contrary to the speculations regarding India's shift to a first-use posture, New Delhi vociferously advocated for, and expressed its readiness to negotiate on, "an international treaty banning first use"—an objective mentioned in India's 1999 draft nuclear doctrine as well. Two weeks before the 2014 election, India's sitting prime minister, Manmohan Singh, in an international seminar in New Delhi, said "more and more voices are speaking out today that the sole function of nuclear weapons, while they exist, should be to deter a nuclear attack. If all states possessing nuclear weapons recognize that this is so and are prepared to declare it, we can quickly move to the establishment of a global no-first-use norm."¹⁸ On 27 September 2013, addressing the UNGA High-level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament, former External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said that as a responsible nuclear power with a credible minimum deterrence policy and a NFU posture, India refused "to participate in an arms race, including a nuclear arms race. . . . We are prepared to negotiate a global No-First-Use treaty and our proposal for a Convention banning the use of nuclear weapons remains on the table."¹⁹ In the early 1970s, China had supported this sentiment with the view that "This is not something difficult to do."²⁰

Though India has not abandoned its advocacy for a global NFU treaty, there is no momentum visible in this direction yet. Besides highlighting the imperatives of a global NFU treaty in the UNGA, India has not taken any concrete initiative to mobilize support and action. Meanwhile, NWSs have modernized their nuclear arsenals, while keeping their options open for first-use. The United States has at no stage agreed to a NFU policy, and Russia has abandoned its Soviet-era posture. Though China has asserted not to use nuclear weapons first, in recent years there has been some ambiguity in Beijing's stance—especially vis-à-vis Taiwan. Pakistan maintains an opaque nuclear policy with a first-use option as "last resort." India is the only NWS that has voluntarily committed itself to a NFU policy. That fact could be the pretext Indian policy makers use to switch to a first-use option. In fact "India acquiring nuclear weapon was partly due to other countries not announcing a NFU policy."²¹

Second, as a logical evolution, India could opt for "flexible response" options. Scholars often equate India's nuclear posture with America's strategy during the 1950 when "President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles adopted a 'massive retaliation' strategy against the Soviet Union, based on clear US nuclear superiority in an era when Russian delivery systems could cross the Atlantic."²² Gradually lost credibility in the face of a growing Soviet retaliatory capability. During the 1960s, America shifted toward the strategy of flexible re-

response, while keeping massive retaliation as one of many options. Robert McNamara, Pres. John F. Kennedy's secretary of defense, could see that America needed usable options. The perceived difficulty in executing the massive retaliation option if deterrence failed led to the adoption of formal the flexible response doctrine. If Cold War experience is a referent, "India's doctrine must create similar options, allowing policymakers every possibility in a crisis—pre-emptive strike, counter-force and counter-value targeting, even assured destruction through massive retaliation."²³

While some members of India's strategic enclave have every intention to see India move away from the NFU posture, some Western scholars argue that "India has already devoted considerable resources since 2003 to develop and acquire capabilities that exceed what is required for a strictly retaliatory nuclear arsenal."²⁴ Retired Indian officials like Shiv Shankar Menon, former foreign secretary and NSA, and B.S. Nagal, former commander-in-chief of the Strategic Forces Command, question the morality and sanctity of NFU. Menon highlights that "there is a potential gray area as to when India would use nuclear weapons first against another NWS. Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against an NWS that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent."²⁵ He further says, "India would hardly risk giving Pakistan the chance to carry out a massive nuclear strike after the Indian response to Pakistan using tactical nuclear weapons."²⁶ For that matter, in a democracy like India, could any political leader afford or dare take a decision to absorb a nuclear first strike from Pakistan, killing millions of Indians, and then retaliate? If India detects Pakistan moving TNWs into the theater of battle and intent to use them, India must initiate preemptive strike. Political scientist Vipin Narang believes India's preemptive strike would be "preemptive nuclear use"; therefore, "the party that goes first in the most likely pathway to nuclear first use in South Asia may not be Pakistan, but India, if and when it believed that Pakistan might be ready to cross the nuclear threshold. The nature of that first use might be a full attempted counterforce strike against Pakistan's strategic nuclear capabilities, and whatever tactical capabilities it could find."²⁷ Narang's narrative omits, inadvertently or otherwise, Pakistan's policy of nuclear use as a "last resort . . . if Pakistan is threatened with extinction,"²⁸ and the conventional preemptive strike option available to India. Professor Narang seems to whimsically elevate the escalation ladder to the strategic level at once. It is another intriguing matter to speculate on Pakistan's response if India's conventional preemptive strike accidentally hits a TNW battery, leading to nuclear explosion within Pakistani territory.

Stressing upon the flexible response option, Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, in their research paper “India’s Counterforce Temptations,” argue that India’s apparently discrepant capability developments like diverse and growing number of accurate and responsive nuclear delivery systems at higher states of readiness, an increasing array of surveillance platforms, and both indigenous and imported air and ballistic missile defenses, and so forth are results of India’s conscious pursuit of more flexible options beyond countervalue targeting, not just the product of either technological drift or strategic confusion.²⁹ While there is logic to this argument, one can also argue that India’s military-technological capability development is meant to effectively defend against Pakistan’s nuclear first-strike doctrine. Clary and Narang seem to have mixed up and linked forthwith India’s defense capability development with a potential nuclear strike by India to disarm Pakistan. In their analysis, they overlook India’s ability to disarm Pakistan’s strategic assets through conventional strikes. Moreover, “there is little indication of any spurt in the numbers of India’s missile,” and other war-fighting machines.³⁰

Above all, what is abysmally overlooked in the entire debate is the nature of India’s nuclear weapons as *political instrument for deterrence* and not *military tools for war fighting*.³¹ The 1999 draft doctrine unequivocally says, “In the absence of global nuclear disarmament India’s strategic interests require effective, credible nuclear *deterrence* and adequate retaliatory capability should *deterrence* fail.”³² [emphases added] So, India’s existing nuclear philosophy does not promote *nuclear use* except in extreme circumstances. India’s nuclear doctrine acknowledges the fact that nuclear weapons are special weapons, not just any other weapons that could be used indiscriminately. As Manpreet Sethi rightly argues, “Indian nuclear doctrine with its emphasis on deterrence, actually seeks to obviate the possibility of the use of the nuclear weapons in the first place.”³³ Sethi puts forward a few genuine benefits of the NFU posture for India: first, the NFU posture removes the temptation to launch a disarming first strike in case of a crisis not just for itself, but also for the adversary. Second, NFU necessitates measures for increased survivability to reduce the vulnerability of the nuclear arsenal and mitigate the use-or-lose syndrome. Third, declining a first-use option removes the need for retaining nuclear forces on hair trigger alert, a situation not at all conducive to strategic stability given the geographical realities of the neighborhood. Fourth, NFU forecloses the chance of an irrational preemptive strike and minimizes the risks of an inadvertent or unauthorized nuclear use. Therefore, Sethi concludes that “a no first use policy is morally the most correct one.”³⁴



US Department of State photo

Figure 2. US engagement in South Asia. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled to Pakistan and India, 4–7 September 2018. In Islamabad, he met with Pakistan’s new Prime Minister Imran Khan, Foreign Minister Qureshi, and Chief of Army Staff Bajwa to discuss US–Pakistan bilateral relations and potential areas for cooperation.

Two Prevailing Myths Nullified

The rationale for revising and updating India’s nuclear weapons posture emanates from Pakistan’s nuclear brinkmanship and possession of TNWs, which are viewed to have lowered the nuclear threshold in the region. As a corollary, the temptation behind Pakistan’s nuclear brinkmanship is India’s conventional superiority. These two myths—Pakistan’s low nuclear threshold and India’s conventional superiority vis-à-vis Pakistan—stand recently nullified in the wake of India’s retaliatory surgical strike in Balakot, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), in response to a terrorist attack by Pakistan-based terrorists, and Pakistan’s consequent counterstrategy.

It is intriguing to evaluate just how low nuclear threshold in South Asia truly is. At the slightest pretext, Pakistan threatens to use nuclear weapons against anyone toward whom Islamabad feels insecure—most frequently India. Many have portrayed the presence of Pakistan’s TNW inventory having significantly lowered the regional nuclear threshold. Islamabad appears to believe there is no space for conventional war between India and Pakistan and that Pakistan can use nuclear weapons on the battlefield if it can cross New Delhi’s redlines without triggering a massive nuclear retaliation from India. Pakistan seems to have deliberately blurred the distinction between Pakistan’s conventional war strategy and its nu-

clear war strategy. On the other hand, New Delhi appears to believe that a limited conventional war can be fought and won below Pakistan's nuclear threshold. More than two decades have passed since India's and Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests during which the existence of "nuclear weapons may have limited the risks of war, but they do not inhibit either side from engaging in low-level conflicts."³⁵ The logic of deterrence no doubt holds in South Asia, but the same does not obviate limited conventional conflicts. The Kargil War in 1999, Operation Parakram in 2001–2002, and the surgical strike by India in 2016 represent rather a combination of Pakistani boldness and Indian calibrated action that have surprised proponents of the stability-instability paradox.

During the last few decades, the dominant narrative of the Indo-Pakistani deterrence stability discourse revolves around the notion of a low nuclear threshold. It was presumed that a subconventional conflict would ultimately escalate to the strategic level in a short span. In response to a terror incident in India unleashed from Pakistani territory would invite New Delhi's swift action, as envisaged in its Cold Start strategy, through shallow penetration a few kilometers inside Pakistan, leading to violation of Pakistan's redlines. It was unclear until the Balakot air strike as to "how deep into Pakistan would be deep enough for India to obtain its objectives; and how deep would be too much for Pakistan."³⁶ As Pakistan did not acknowledge or attribute any such action unleashed by India, the first surgical strike in PoK in 2016 understandably did not warrant Pakistani retaliation. However, India's airstrike in Balakot, deep inside Pakistan, was a blatant challenge to Pakistan's so-called 'redlines'. Evidently, Pakistan's response to India's air strike in Balakot has been conventional. Besides, Islamabad has often resorted to nuclear brinkmanship at the slightest pretext ever since Pakistan acquired nuclear weapons. The Balakot surgical strike proved Pakistan's nuclear brinkmanship "a bluff which was long due."³⁷ Therefore, the assumption that Pakistan's nuclear threshold is low is arbitrary, unrealistic, and unfashionable now. Irrespective of the compelling circumstances, if Islamabad considered the Balakot surgical strike as not breaching its threshold and not necessitating a nuclear response, Pakistan's threshold is, at least, a level up. Moreover, Pakistan's official position has been nuclear "first use" but as "a last resort," which suggests that the nuclear threshold is not as low as it is perceived.

Also, one needs to understand what factors lower the nuclear threshold in South Asia. Is it the miniaturization of nuclear warheads and short-range nuclear-capable vectors, or constant harping by Pakistan on the nuclear conflict scare? As India does not differentiate between *strategic* and *tactical* weapons, the lowering of the threshold does not bring any qualitative change.

Evidently, limited conventional conflict remains a viable option in South Asia even under the shadow of possible nuclear options. India will likely continue with the straightforward nuclear posture of *deterrence by punishment*, where *strategic* and *tactical* are irrelevant. Therefore, for India TNWs have little utility in the South Asian context—especially since they seem to provide no major advantages to Pakistan. The hardest lesson for Islamabad is that its “nuclear romanticism,”³⁸ based on the idea that TNWs can solve its conventional military imbalance vis-à-vis India, only guarantees a larger nuclear exchange should such hostilities erupt.³⁹ For some decades the advisor to Pakistan’s National Command Authority and pioneer director general of Pakistan’s Strategic Plans Division, Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, retired, formulated Pakistan’s nuclear redlines that drove the strategic stability debate in South Asia, which proved to be vague at best. Another staunch advocate of Pakistan’s vague rhetoric was retired Pakistan Army lieutenant general cum director general of Inter-Services Intelligence cum political commentator Asad Durani, who said in 2003 that Pakistan does not “identify those core interests that, if threatened, could trigger a nuclear retort. These are elements of operational planning and stating them could betray a country’s conventional limits.”⁴⁰

Therefore, given such opaqueness, Pakistan’s nuclear threshold is subject to India’s interpretation; *undeterred by the TNWs India will decide on its own terms the level of Pakistan’s threshold*, which would be proportionate to India’s concerns and grievances against Pakistani misadventure. For example, getting inside Pakistan to conduct air strikes on terror training camps, as was done with the Balakot air strike, which was demonstrated to be well below Pakistan’s nuclear threshold!

Similarly, the prevailing notion of conventional military superiority of India vis-à-vis Pakistan seems shaken in the wake of Pakistan’s response to India’s air strike. Certainly, India’s conventional military capability is numerically larger than Pakistan’s; practically, Pakistan will not be able to sustain a long-drawn war with India given the latter’s huge force strength and wherewithal. However, in terms of operational strategy, Pakistan seems well matched to India, and this is likely to continue to be the case. Islamabad has proven that Pakistan would prefer “eating leaves and grass” to maintain parity with India, especially in terms of strategy and tactics. Islamabad is capable of causing damage to India through Pakistan’s conventional military capabilities. Here the intention is not to underestimate or downgrade India’s capability of causing massive damage to Pakistan or to defend against Pakistani threats; rather, the aim is to highlight the fact that India has much to lose in a conventional war, keeping in mind its significant economic progress. Logically, therefore, in the years ahead, India will resort to a massive conventional force upgrade, including induction and procurement of sophisticated systems and defense capabilities designed to take the Indo-Pakistani con-

ventional military disparity to a greater height. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that in the future the disparity in terms of conventional force levels between the rivals will widen.

Repercussions on Deterrence Stability

A revision of India's nuclear posture will be a reality sooner or later; the doctrine is not cast in tablets of stone. However, what its final shape and outcome will be is a matter of speculation. If India shifts toward a first-use posture, it is logical to argue that there would be lasting repercussions on the regional deterrence stability currently in vogue. Pakistan's persisting ambiguity and opaque nuclear strategy on one side and India's massive retaliation posture on the other side have effectively restrained the two rivals. During this period, a conventional war, many terrorist incidents, several military standoffs, and surgical strikes have taken place, but none of these broke the nuclear threshold. Would India changing its nuclear posture upset this perceived strategic stability? Conventional wisdom suggests that with nuclear first-use option, coupled with counterforce strategy, "every serious crisis will risk a potential strategic nuclear exchange" on the subcontinent.⁴¹

To evaluate the repercussions on regional deterrence stability, one needs to deconstruct, first, the prevailing value-laden question: Does India's shift toward first-use strategy matter much to Pakistan, which does not trust even India's current NFU pledge?⁴² Pakistan is not convinced of India's moralistic abhorrence to nuclear weapons and self-imposed NFU. From the very beginning, Islamabad has believed that India already has a first-use doctrine. In fact, India's nuclear doctrine is a unilateral decision; Pakistan is aware that New Delhi can revoke that doctrine anytime the situation warrants doing so: "Pakistan believes that there is no way of making the NFU policy incapable of first use."⁴³ Islamabad is especially suspicious of India's Cold Start strategy, which seeks to circumvent a nuclear response from Pakistan, making the strategy independent of India's NFU pledge.⁴⁴ For that matter, no country takes NFU pledge at face value: "neither China nor India takes one another's NFU seriously. Similarly, neither the United States nor Pakistan has expressed absolute faith in the NFU pledges of China or India, respectively."⁴⁵ Therefore, due to the enduring widespread distrust between the two South Asian rivals, India's shift from NFU to a first-use or an ambiguous posture will have *limited impact* on the prevailing regional deterrence stability.

However, according to experts participating in a 2017 discussion hosted by the Pakistani think-tank Centre for International Studies (CISS), "revision of nuclear doctrine by India would exacerbate Pakistan's security concerns and undermine South Asia's deterrence-based stability."⁴⁶ At the meeting, CISS executive director Ali Sawwar Naqvi highlighted two concerns in this regard: "the growing

Indo-US cooperation, and the ambiguity shrouding the narrative.” Specifically, experts agreed that “the resulting environment could further reduce space for dialogue between” Pakistan and India.⁴⁷

Additionally, adoption of nuclear first-use policy will prompt stringent operational preparedness and place nuclear forces on hair trigger alert, with operationally ready nuclear forces forward deployed. As a first-use posture is vulnerable to a preemptive attack, dispersal of warheads is prudent, requiring large inventories for survivability and swift mobilization. Rajesh Rajagopalan, professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, worries that in response to India’s shift, “Pakistan may move toward a nuclear force that is in a constant state of readiness, instead of keeping its nuclear forces disassembled.”⁴⁸ Whatever will replace the strategic nuclear restraint prevailing in South Asian today, a tempting atmosphere of nuclear use and vertical proliferation will persist; if one side ever resorts to a nuclear strike, the pressure and compulsion will mount on the other side for immediate retaliation.

In addition, the number game of nuclear warheads would be insurmountable, and a mad rush to stockpile such weapons will be the norm of South Asian nuclear discourse. A first-strike strategy would require India to have a far larger weapons inventory than Pakistan possesses, which will ultimately alter the existing nuclear balance that is in favor of Pakistan. Rajagopalan assumes that, hypothetically if two warheads per aimpoint are considered, India will need “at least 60 warheads even for a conservative target list of 30 aimpoints in Pakistan. Of course, Indian decision makers will also need to keep some weapons in reserve to target any surviving Pakistani nuclear assets and to retaliate if Pakistan attacks India with these. If we assume just 30 warheads, India needs a total of about 90 warheads just to conduct a surprise ‘splendid’ first-strike against Pakistan, which will leave India with barely two dozen warheads to deter China.”⁴⁹ Therefore, India’s shift to a first-use strategy, premised on preemptive strike, will prompt India to achieve significant numerical superiority that will lead to an arms race because Pakistan will be forced to respond.⁵⁰

Moreover, to address the requirements of a first-use posture, India would expedite production of more warheads, possibly opting for TNWs. This would allow India to strategize a *graduated response*, or *flexible response*, instead of massive retaliation. In this context, India’s current policy of not differentiating between strategic and tactical nuclear weapons will end.

Also, the most intriguing repercussion on deterrence stability in South Asia would be, as Thomas Schelling described, the emergence of a condition of “reciprocal fear of surprise attack,” as both sides will be worried that the other might launch first. Demand and race for fielding robust surveillance technology and systems would also grow. Moreover, the entire nuclear discourse would be colored

by the competition to *win* a nuclear war, rather than striving to see that deterrence does not fail.

Additionally, even though India's doctrinal shift would not surprise Pakistan, Islamabad would be under tremendous pressure to maintain parity with India. Given Washington's current apathy toward Islamabad, Pakistan would likely inch closer toward China in pursuit of such parity. The thriving missile-nuclear nexus between them would further intensify, making China a forceful stakeholder in Indo-Pakistani nuclear discourse.

This entire scenario would not be conducive to sustaining crisis stability in South Asia. Given the geographical realities, any inadvertent use of nuclear weapons will be devastating. Theoretically, the greater number of warheads and the greater frequency of their deployment, the higher chances increase of their potential misuse or inadvertent use.

The culmination of the debate over India's nuclear doctrine revision is a matter of conjecture. A detailed authoritative study of the utility of India's current nuclear doctrine is required to address all the relevant issues in their totality. However, as circumstances have changed since India articulated its nuclear doctrine, periodic reviews of India's doctrine is essential for greater clarity. ♣

Dr. Sitakanta Mishra

Dr. Mishra is an assistant professor of international relations in the School of Liberal Studies of Pandit Deendayal Petroleum University, Gujarat, India. The paper was presented at the International Studies Association's Annual Convention in Toronto during 27–30 March 2019. The author acknowledges the review and valuable inputs by Sameer Lalwani and Frank O'Donnell. The author sincerely thanks the Stimson Center, Washington, DC, for sponsorship.

Notes

1. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), "Ek Bharat—Shreshtha Bharat: Election Manifesto 2014," 4 April 2014, 39, <http://bjpelectionmanifesto.com/pdf/manifesto2014.pdf>.
2. Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 7–52, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00340
3. The Pokhran-II tests were India's second nuclear weapons tests—a series of five nuclear bomb explosions conducted at the Indian Army's Pokhran Test Range in May 1998.
4. Siddharth Varadarajan, "'Fizzle' Claim for Thermonuclear Test Refuted," *The Hindu*, 27 August 2009, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/siddharth-varadarajan/Fizzle-claim-for-thermonuclear-test-refuted/article11856261.ece>.
5. Rajagopalan, "India's Nuclear Strategy."
6. Douglas Busvine, "Modi Says Committed to No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Reuters*, 16 April 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-election-nuclear/indias-modi-says-committed-to-no-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons-idUSBREA3F15H20140416>.
7. Ibid.

8. Indrani Bagchi, "India Not Revisiting Its Nuclear Doctrine, Modi Assures Japan," *Times of India*, 30 August 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-not-revisiting-its-nuclear-doctrine-Modi-assures-Japan/articleshow/41231521.cms>.
9. "Rajiv Was Temperamentally a Man of Peaceful Intent," Rediff.com, July 2008, <http://www.rediff.com/news/slide-show/slide-show-1-an-interview-with-k-subrahmanyam/20110210.htm>.
10. "A Look Back at the 2008 Floor Test When UPA Faced No-confidence," *Hindustan Times*, 22 July 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/a-look-back-at-the-2008-floor-test-when-upa-faced-no-confidence/story-zEf4TMGoSOK89oYiTrbMnN.html>.
11. Press Trust of India, "EC Gives Clean Chit to PM Modi on Nuclear Button for Diwali Remark," *India Today*, 3 May 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/ec-gives-clean-chit-pm-modi-nuclear-button-for-diwali-remark-1515803-2019-05-03>.
12. "Abandon No-First Use Policy, Security Board Tells Govt," Rediff.com, 9 January 2003, <https://www.rediff.com/news/2003/jan/09ia.htm>.
13. BJP, "Ek Bharat—Shreshtha Bharat," 39.
14. Ibid.
15. Michael Krepon, "Whatever Happened to Minimum, Credible Deterrence?," *Arms Control Wonk*, 6 January 2014, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/403996/what-ever-happened-to-minimum-credible-deterrence/>; Vipin Narang, "India's nuclear strategy twenty years later: From reluctance to maturation," *India Review* 17, no. 1 (2018): 159–179.
16. Raj Chengappa, "Demonetise Nuclear Weapons Currency," *India Today*, 17 November 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/ground-zero/story/20161128-demonetisation-nuclear-weapons-currency-raj-chengappa-india-narendra-modi-829899-2016-11-17>.
17. Sitakanta Mishra, "India's New Nuclear Gossip: From NFU to NUI?," *Indrastra Global*, 10 November 2016, <https://www.indrastra.com/2016/11/NEWS-India-s-New-Nuclear-Gossip-From-NFU-to-NUI-002-11-2016-0023.html>; and Rama Lakshmi, "India's Defense Minister Questions Its No First-use Nuclear Policy — Then Says It's His Personal Opinion," *Washington Post*, 10 November 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/10/indias-defense-minister-questions-its-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-then-says-its-his-personal-opinion/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.3d8250a910d7.
18. Press Trust of India, "PM Manmohan Singh proposes global 'no-first-use' convention on N-weapons," *Economic Times*, 2 April 2014, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pm-manmohan-singh-proposes-global-no-first-use-convention-on-n-weapons/articleshow/33133658.cms>.
19. Statement by H.E. Mr. Salman Khurshid Minister of External Affairs of India at the High level Meeting of the General Assembly on Nuclear Disarmament 68th United Nations General Assembly, 26 September 2013, http://www.un.org/en/ga/68/meetings/nucleardisarmament/pdf/IN_en.pdf.
20. "Push for Global No First Use," *New Indian Express*, 10 July 2014, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2014/jul/10/Push-for-Global-No-First-Use-633977.html>.
21. Kumar Sundaram and M.V. Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2018), 156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1438737>.
22. Ajai Shukla, "Come Out of the Nuclear Closet," *Business Standard*, 14 April 2014, https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/ajai-shukla-come-out-of-the-nuclear-closet-114041400866_1.html.

23. Ibid.
24. Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19), 7.
25. Shiv Shankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2016), 110.
26. Ibid., 117.
27. Vipin Narang, "Plenary: Beyond the Nuclear Threshold: Causes and Consequences of First Use" (speech, Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference, Washington, DC, 20 March 2017), <https://fbfy83yid9j1dqsev3zq0w8n-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Vipin-Narang-Remarks-Carnegie-Nukefest-2017.pdf>.
28. Former Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf quoted as having said this in an interview published in April 2002 in the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*; and Peter R. Lavoy, "Pakistan's Nuclear Posture: Security and Survivability," n.d., http://www.npolicy.org/article_file/Pakistans_Nuclear_Posture-Security_and_Survivability.pdf.
29. Clary and Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations," 7–8.
30. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "India's Nuclear Strategy: A Shift to Counterforce?," Observer Research Foundation, 30 March 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-nuclear-strategy-shift-counterforce/>.
31. Manpreet Sethi, *Nuclear Strategy: India's March Towards Credible Deterrence* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2009), 126.
32. Nuclear Security Advisory Board, "Draft Report on Indian Nuclear Doctrine," 1999, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/india/doctrine/990817-indnucl.d.htm>.
33. Sethi, *Nuclear Strategy*, 127.
34. Ibid, 134–41.
35. P. R. Chari, P.I. Cheema, and S. P. Cohen, *Perception, Politics and Security in South Asia: The Compound Crisis of 1990* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 135.
36. V.R. Raghavan, "Limited War and Nuclear Escalation in South Asia," *Nonproliferation Review* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2001), 16, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/44c3/6269658539992df4b5d67e6678a053efcc4b.pdf>.
37. Vishnu Prakash, "Balakot Air Strikes: Calling Pakistan's Nuclear Bluff Was Long Due," *Quint*, 4 March 2019, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/india-pakistan-air-strikes-war-terrorism-international-response>.
38. Richard Weitz coined the term *nuclear romanticism* to describe the "delusional thinking" among the Soviet military high command that nuclear weapons would allow for a decisive victory over NATO. Richard Weitz, "The Historical Context," in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, ed. Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart, and Jeffrey D. McCausland (Carlisle, PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1103>.
39. David O. Smith, "The US Experience with Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Lessons for South Asia," Stimson Center, 43, http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/research-pdfs/David_Smith_Tactical_Nuclear_Weapons.pdf.
40. Asad Durani, "Doctrinal Doublespeak" (paper, Pugwash Meeting no. 280: "Avoiding an India-Pakistan Nuclear Confrontation," Lahore, Pakistan, 11–12 March 2003), https://pugwashconferences.files.wordpress.com/2003/03/200303_lahore_durrani_paper.pdf.
41. Clary and Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations," 52.

42. Abhijnan Rej, "Pakistan Tests Babur III Missile: How Should India Interpret This Latest Move?," Observer Research Foundation, 10 January 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/pakistan-tests-babur-iii-missile-india-interpret-latest-move/>.
43. Reshmi Kazi, "Why India Should Retain Its No-First-Use Policy?," *IDS Comment*, 11 April 2011, https://idsa.in/idsacomments/WhyIndiashouldretainitsNoFirstUsepolicy_rkazi_110411.
44. Ibid.
45. Sitara Noor, "India's NFU Dilemma: To Be or Not to Be," *South Asian Voices*, 29 November 2016, <https://southasianvoices.org/indias-nfu-dilemma-not/>.
46. "Indian Nuclear Doctrine Revision to Pose Security Risk for Pakistan: Experts," *News International* (Pakistan), 22 August 2017, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/225076-Indian-nuclear-doctrine-revision-to-pose-security-risks-for-Pakistan-experts>.
47. Naeem Salik, "Change in India's Nuclear Doctrine Could Lead to Security Concerns for Pakistan," *Dawn*, 22 August 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1353043>.
48. Alicia Sanders-Zakre and Kelsey Davenport, "Is India Shifting Nuclear Doctrine?," *Arms Control Today*, May 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/print/8586>.
49. Ibid.
50. Rajagopalan, "India's Nuclear Strategy," n. 30.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.