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Findings

The thesis “**India’s Evolving Nuclear Doctrine: A Study of Changing Trends (2014-Till Present)**” examines the evolution of India’s nuclear doctrine with a particular focus on developments from 2014 onwards. In particular, this study analysed the potential shifting trends in India’s nuclear doctrine in the backdrop of two developments happening simultaneously, that is, India developing a suite of strategic capabilities that can potentially also be used in first strike counterforce options and the increasing number of statements made by Indian officials and strategic analysts expressing discomfort with the existing nuclear doctrine and arguing for its revision. The study analysed both these developments through the theoretical lens of national security, domestic politics, and normative models.

The nuclear force capabilities that India has developed or has shown interest in is not the result of a conscious pursuit of developing first use counterforce options against Pakistan. Rather, seen from the perspective of national security, these capability developments are part of Indian attempts to compensate for deterrence gaps with China as well as to build a credible second-strike against it. Evidently, in recent years India’s nuclear posture is witnessing a change with more focus shifting to China. Beijing’s progressive expansion and modernization of its nuclear forces and the resultant deterrence gap that it creates has raised concerns in New Delhi. Alongside this, the deteriorating bilateral relations between the two states manifested at the regular border clashes along the LAC had necessitated that India take countermeasures. Thus, the development of long-range missiles that can reach mainland China such as Agni-III, Agni-IV and Agni-V can be seen as attempts to create credible deterrence options against China.

Likewise, India’s interest in a limited BMD system and MIRVs is dictated by national security concerns and not by any first-use counterforce temptations against Pakistan. With both of its nuclear adversaries engaged in expanding, upgrading, and diversifying their arsenals, it is imperative for India to take measures to safeguard its national security interests by strengthening the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. Seen from this perspective, developing a limited BMD system that will safeguard the command-and-control system becomes significant for India’s assured retaliation nuclear posture manifested in NFU policy. The BMD system will enhance the credibility and deterrence value of India’s nuclear deterrent as it will ensure the

survivability of the critical components of India's nuclear arsenal especially the National Command Authority and thus convey certainty of retaliation. Also, it would enhance and reinforce the credibility and deterrence value of India's nuclear deterrent by complicating the strategic calculations of India's nuclear adversaries by sowing a seed of uncertainty in their calculations over the success of any disarming first strike against it. The concerns among a section of strategic analysts that the deployment of BMD system may tempt India to undertake a first use counterforce strike against Pakistan is negated by the fact that India follows a No First Use policy. And essentially due to the technological and financial limitations, India cannot and should not envisage the deployment of the BMD system all over the country. India, being a large country, BMD cannot provide fool-proof protection against Pakistani retaliatory nuclear strikes. Having ballistic defenses for Delhi and Mumbai, as the DRDO claims the part-I of the BMS program entails, will leave the rest of the country vulnerable to Pakistani nuclear retaliation. This will keep the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad stable on the notion of each being able to inflict enough damage that the other side would find unacceptable. Thus, as aptly pointed out by Rajesh Basrur, "the purpose of an Indian missile defence can be to try and minimize damage after deterrence has failed, which is far from stating that it will give an Indian leader the confidence to strike first."

With regard to India's interest to MIRV its long-range delivery systems, the primary driving forces are perceived strategic vulnerabilities vis-à-vis China. Long range MIRVed missiles are viewed as acting as force-multiplier against China by preventing a widening imbalance in land-based ballistic missile forces, providing a hedge against Chinese deployment of BMD, and maintaining the credibility of retaliatory capabilities. Further, the Indian investment in MIRV technology is consistent with the existing nuclear doctrine in that they will reinforce the Indian doctrinal commitment to retaliate massively to any nuclear attack on it.

However, given the triangular nature of nuclear dyad in Southern Asia involving India, Pakistan and China, India's deployment of MIRVs on its missiles, while ostensibly done keeping China into consideration, is likely to raise security concerns in Pakistan and make the country to take counter measures. Expectedly, the Pakistani countermeasures would involve exploring the BMD technology, developing more and more cruise missiles, acquiring MIRVs of its own and placing its nuclear forces on high alerts.

The Indian investments in sea-based capabilities— the development of submarines and sub-launched ballistic missiles— are done to build to reinforce the credibility of the nuclear deterrent and secure a credible second-strike capability. Given that sea-based capabilities are considered as difficult for enemy detection, the building of sea-leg of India's nuclear triad is seen to enhance the survivability of India's nuclear deterrent and thereby secure a credible second-strike capability.

Thus, viewed from the national security model, the Indian investments in BMD, MIRVs and other host of capabilities are driven by the need to enhance the deterrence value and credibility of its nuclear deterrent against its nuclear adversaries. Moreover, these capability developments are within the contours of its declared nuclear doctrine and represent the progressive maturing of India's nuclear arsenal as sanctioned by the nuclear doctrine.

However, the role of India's nuclear-scientific establishment in pushing for the development of these capabilities cannot be discounted. The role of India's nuclear-scientific establishment in India's nuclear weapons program is significant and well documented. Evidently, the organizational interests and imperatives of the DRDO are also at play in India's pursuit of these capability developments. The scientists at DRDO have their own organizational and prestige interests that leads them to advertise the development of these capabilities. The most visible

manifestation of this phenomenon was when in February 2013 the DRDO advertised that it is developing the Agni-VI, and that it would be MIRVed with multiple warheads, but admitted that it still does not have the sanction of the government to develop the Agni-VI. This illustrates that the development of such capabilities is partly driven by the nuclear-scientific establishment and that there is no consensus among political decision-makers in India over the necessity of such systems. The prestige and reputational benefits also act as an incentive. Developing technologies such as BMD and MIRVs are perceived as helping achieve a sort of nuclear parity with other great powers, especially with China, the main strategic rival.

The changing external strategic environment exerting influence on India's nuclear debate and behavior has a long lineage. Thus, the recent expansion, upgradation, and diversification of the nuclear arsenals of Pakistan and China reigniting a debate in India should not appear surprising. Pakistan's resort to sub-conventional warfare and nuclear blackmail and the perceptible failure of India to credibly deter the former to desist from such behavior coupled with raising deterrence gap with Beijing and the latter's aggression on LAC has ignited a debate among the Indian strategic community over the continuing relevance and efficacy of the existing nuclear doctrine. The comments and statements by senior government officials, both serving and retired, expressing discomfort with the existing nuclear doctrine, and thereby showing a lack of strategic confidence in it has provided new impetus to this debate. Expectedly, this has raised concerns as to whether India's nuclear doctrine is witnessing a shift from the current 'assured retaliation' posture based on NFU towards more flexible options including postures of first use, launch-on-launch, and launch-under-attack options vis-à-vis the India-Pakistan nuclear dyad.

In attempting to make sense of these statements, the study found that there are two factors that drive them. One, there are genuine national security concerns over the rapid advances of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and the growing deterrence gap with China. Through its display of risk-taking behavior, Pakistan has not only successfully exerted escalation dominance during crisis episodes, but it has also made India's nuclear deterrent seem non-credible. Given such circumstances, many strategic analysts view India's rescinding of the NFU commitment and adopting more flexible options in its place as imperative to safeguard India's national security interests. For instance, abandoning the NFU declaration is perceived to end the comfort that Pakistan has with India's NFU policy. With respect to China, whereas nuclear weapons have not featured prominently in the bilateral relationship, Beijing's modernization and upgradation of its nuclear arsenal coupled with its belligerence along the LAC have raised new anxieties in New Delhi. Indeed, there is an emerging section within the strategic community that advocate that India deploys its nuclear deterrent against Beijing just as Pakistan holds against India.

The second factor that drives the opposition to the NFU policy— the not so often statements by senior Indian officials, specially made during some crisis situations, expressing skepticism with the existing nuclear doctrine, and advocating for greater assertiveness in India's nuclear posture— is to signal firm Indian resolve to the adversary and to the domestic audience. Here, the security concerns are not central. Rather, the main objective is to display greater nuclear assertiveness in India's posture and thereby demonstrate firm resolve. These well-thought-out statements, usually made during crises episodes with Pakistan, are primarily aimed to influence the domestic public opinion and the adversaries (read Pakistan's) strategic calculations, and not necessarily reflect any explicit real changes in the nuclear doctrine. However, they are a reflection of a policy of injecting deliberate strategic ambiguity around India's declared nuclear posture.

Creating ambiguity around India's nuclear posture is seen as enhancing the deterrence value of India's nuclear forces against adversaries even without publicly revising it. The comments by

two senior officials, by Manohar Parrikar in 2016 that India should adopt unpredictability in its doctrine by “not declaring whether or not it has a NFU policy” and by Rajnath Singh in 2019 that while “India had adhered to NFU policy until now, what happens in future depends on circumstances” can be seen as reflecting such thinking. Likewise, Shivshankar Menon, by creatively reinterpreting India’s existing nuclear doctrine, espoused such thinking. Menon construed the existing doctrine as having the flexibility to permit India to conduct a pre-emption strikes. Injecting ambiguity in India’s declared nuclear posture as to when and under what circumstances India would use nuclear weapons is viewed as beneficial as far credibility of India’s nuclear deterrent is concerned. It would not only give India more options at its disposal such as first use, launch-under-attack, launch-on-launch and even no first use, it will also end the comfort that India’s nuclear adversaries (read Pakistan) have with India’s NFU policy.

Notably, acting as a confidence-building measure in the South Asian region, India’s NFU declaration had assured its neighbours that its nuclear capability is only for defensive purposes. However, India’s flirtations with a policy of first use of nuclear weapons, which is implicitly manifest in a policy of strategic ambiguity, or even Pakistan’s suspicion of its adoption has the potential to destabilize the regional deterrence stability. It would lead Pakistan to take commensurate measures at both the doctrinal and capability buildup level. All this has the propensity to aggravate future military crisis.

Alongside the NFU declaration, the other pillar of the nuclear doctrine that has gone through implicit subtle change in recent years is the Indian doctrinal commitment to pursue universal global nuclear disarmament. Whereas India continues to rhetorically refer to global nuclear disarmament, at the policy level, the thrust of its disarmament diplomacy has shifted from complete disarmament to arms control and non-proliferation. Not only is India’s traditional leadership role on disarmament missing in recent years, but it has also shown interest to join the same arms control and non-proliferation regime that it once characterized as discriminatory. Thus, the contemporary Indian approach to disarmament is guided more by *realpolitik* strategic considerations rather than by the normative moral values that used to dominate its traditional disarmament diplomacy. Moreover, post-2008, India’s nuclear diplomacy is aimed at integrating with and gaining full membership of the global nuclear rule-making architecture. Joining the MTCR, Australia Group and the Wassenaar Arrangement are best reflection of this trend. This reorientation in India’s disarmament diplomacy, largely a product of a newfound realism in India’s foreign policy, is driven by several factors ranging from by the failure of five-NPT nuclear powers to undertake disarmament to scepticism within the Indian elite over the prospects of complete global nuclear disarmament in foreseeable future to the failure of India’s own disarmament agenda to take off.