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The Making of India's Nuclear Doctrine

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Nuclear tests by India in May 1998 triggered international criticism and imposition of sanctions by nations that believed that the cause of nuclear non-proliferation had been grievously injured. As a result, New Delhi felt the need to explain the security compulsions behind its decision to test and the manner in which it would operationalise its nuclear deterrence. The articulation of a nuclear doctrine emerged as one of the ways of doing so.

The National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), set up in December 1998 as a subsidiary body of the National Security Council, was tasked to prepare a nuclear doctrine. Shri K Subrahmanyam, a well-known nuclear strategist, was appointed as the Convenor of this body, which comprised of retired military and civilian officials and distinguished academics.

The NSAB prepared a draft doctrine and presented it to Mr. Brajesh Mishra, India's first National Security Advisor (NSA). A career diplomat, he is remembered for his strategic astuteness. He decided to make the draft public, an action that appeared contrary to the largely prevalent opacity around nuclear issues in India. While putting out the doctrine on August 17, 1999, he emphasised the need to stimulate domestic discussions before the general elections scheduled later that year. To recall, Prime Minister Vajpayee was then heading a caretaker government, having lost the confidence of the parliament in April 1999 by one vote. The PM also stressed that the draft was not final policy. "We want that document to be properly studied before it attains finality."

Besides fostering domestic nuclear debate, Mishra's action likely had other motives. First, it signalled India's resolve to retain its nuclear capability in the face of the US-led clamour to denuclearise. The act of declaring a nuclear doctrine underscored India's serious consideration of

the role and arsenal requirements of its nuclear deterrence and that it was not going to cap, roll back or eliminate the programme. Secondly, it projected India as a 'responsible' nuclear state that had voluntarily placed its nuclear cards on the table. The document showed moderation in force build-up and support for non-proliferation and disarmament.

It is also significant that the doctrine was announced within a month from the end of the Kargil conflict on July 26, 1999. The 90-day 'war' had been fought to evict soldiers of Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry who, in the garb of the Mujahideen, had intruded across the Line of Control (LoC) to occupy the heights from where they could threaten India's arterial national highway connecting Srinagar and Leh. It was an attempt at territorial salami-slicing by the Pakistan Army. Pakistan presumed that the international community, fearful of a conflict between two nuclear-armed nations, would force India not to escalate and accept the *fait accompli*. This turned out to be a faulty assumption. Pakistan's action was dubbed 'a case of nuclear blackmail' by the international community. Eventually, Indian military action and international pressure coerced Pakistan to withdraw.

Of course, the world did despair at the prospect of two nuclear states going to war. Still, Pakistan's reckless behaviour stood out in sharp contrast to India's military restraint, evident in its decision not to expand the conflict into other theatres while also circumscribing the area of action of the Indian Air Force within the Indian side of the LoC. This further contributed to reinforcing India's image as a mature nuclear state.

The announcement of the nuclear doctrine at this stage added to India's reputation. It was also showcased as a commitment that had been undertaken under the Lahore Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that PM Vajpayee had boldly concluded with Nawaz Sharif, his Pakistani counterpart, in February 1999. The document contained many progressive nuclear confidence-building measures, one of which was that both countries would offer transparency around their nuclear doctrines. India honoured its commitment despite Pakistan's act of imposing a conflict on it within weeks of the 'Lahore bus diplomacy.'

The Responses that Followed

Pakistan's Foreign Minister described the Indian move of announcing its nuclear doctrine as an attempt "to score points and present itself as a more responsible nuclear power in the region."

He said that Islamabad too, was engaged in giving the finishing touches to its own doctrine. However, no such document has yet been declared more than two decades since then.

Meanwhile, the immediate international response to India's declaration of the nuclear doctrine was negative. The US State Department was categorical in its statement, "we don't find it an encouraging document. We find it a document that describes the desire to develop a nuclear arsenal and that is something that we think is not in the security interests of India, the subcontinent, or the United States, or the world." Other countries, such as Russia, Japan, and China too, expressed varying degrees of concern and urged constraint.

Gradually however, with India's diplomatic outreach to major capitals, the perception changed. The transparency offered by India came to be seen in a positive light. The unambiguous declaration of a political role for nuclear weapons, along with minimum deterrence and a counter-strike policy that ruled out nuclear pre-emption, showed that India was willing to impose restraints and checks on itself.

In fact, it was this restraint that invoked disquiet among some in the Indian strategic community. While the arguments on the individual attributes of the doctrine merit a detailed assessment, as will be undertaken in forthcoming articles of *NuClearly Put*, it is sufficed to say here that the formulation of India's nuclear doctrine so early in its journey served several important purposes. It provided much-needed coherence for building nuclear capability at home; it also introduced the contours of nuclear India to the world and thus smoothed its diplomatic reintegration.

The document produced by the NSAB has remained a draft to this day. But, on January 4, 2003, the Cabinet Committee on Security issued a press note on the operationalisation of the nuclear doctrine. This is the publicly known official doctrine for India. It retains the major attributes of the draft and further outlines some operational arrangements around command and control.

Doctrine as Guide

In doing so, the nuclear doctrine has played its role in offering a set of guiding principles. These reflect the philosophy behind one's nuclear weapons and answer the fundamental questions of how, when, and where the weapons would be used for national security. Thereby, the doctrine helps India determine its force structure and force posture. But it is not meant to describe

the cost of this capability build-up or proffer an operational strategy. Rather staying at a higher conceptual level, it lays down the foundational principles that can be used to determine arsenal size and type, the necessary command and control architecture, survivability measures, deployment status, etc.

The doctrine can also guide the nation towards an ideal that it desires. For instance, India's nuclear doctrine identifies global, verifiable, and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament as a national security objective. It contends that "India shall continue its efforts to achieve the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world at an early date." While aspiring for this ideal, it nevertheless also fleshes out the concept of nuclear deterrence for India. For instance, in accepting the principle of 'no first use,' the doctrine directs India's nuclear forces to be "based on a triad of aircraft, mobile land-based missiles and sea-based assets."

The doctrine indicates intention and thus offers a certain predictability in capability build-up and its use to the adversary. For the purpose of establishing stability in a nuclear dyad, such reassurance can be most beneficial. Countries that tend to maintain vague or ambiguous nuclear doctrines miss out on this aspect and create room for misperceptions that may prove costly in conflict. In the nuclear domain, maintaining a certain level of clarity on capability and resolve to use it, is critical for credibility of deterrence. The doctrine can be an effective mode for this communication. India has consciously chosen this path instead of opting for ambiguity with all its associated risks.

A nuclear doctrine emanates from the strategic culture of a country and reflects its cultural background, historical experiences, societal norms, and worldview. Thus, a doctrine can afford to be enduring, unlike a nuclear posture that would change with external threats and its own capability progression. In fact, the reason that despite many reviews of India's nuclear doctrine, a need for revision has not been felt, at least up until now, is because the principles that it purports are anchored in the largely immutable basics of nuclear deterrence. The doctrine captures the essential nature of this weapon of mass destruction to guide India on how best to 'use' it.

Obviously, a doctrine cannot be cast in stone and may need to be amended. Moreover, Changing capabilities and emergence of new contingencies do matter. For this reason, it is sensible to keep the doctrine under periodic review while remaining conscious of the fact that this document is meant to be a higher-order guide to strategy and posture.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Recommended Readings:

- Arvind Gupta, *How India Manages its National Security* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2018)
- Raju GC Thomas and Amit Gupta, *India's Nuclear Security*, (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000)
- PR Chari, "India's Nuclear Doctrine: Confused Ambitions", *Non-proliferation Review*, Fall/Winter 2000.
- Manpreet Sethi, *Nuclear Strategy: India's March towards Credible Deterrence* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2009)

