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## The Logic of No First Use Strategy

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Having focused on nuclear warhead numbers in the context of 'credible minimum deterrence' in last month's *NuClearly Put*, we continue with the individual examination of attributes of India's nuclear doctrine. This month, the lens is on 'no-first-use' (NFU) of nuclear weapons against nuclear-armed states, a strategy currently maintained by China and India.

After its nuclear test in 1964, China was the first country to state, "it will never at any time and under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons". India, meanwhile, had endorsed this approach even before it acquired nuclear weapons. In the early 1980s, a committee consisting of General Krishnaswamy Sundarji and K. Subrahmanyam recommended that India be "guided by a strict doctrine of no-first-use and dedicated only to retaliating against a nuclear attack in India".<sup>1</sup> In 1994, India even proposed NFU to Pakistan in a non-paper. Having given much thought to the value of the NFU strategy even before the tests in 1998, this policy was enshrined in the nuclear doctrine in 1999.

However, the strategy has generated much debate. Western strategists have dismissed it as an unverifiable declaratory position. They are inclined towards deterrence by showcasing nuclear weapons for warfighting, and find it difficult to accept that nations can eschew pre-emption. Within India, too, many have dubbed NFU a passive or reactive strategy since it cedes the initiative to the adversary, tying its own hands to retaliation only. Much angst is expressed by the military and strategic community that India has not been able to deter Pakistan's use of cross-border terrorism and China's attempts at salami slicing at the border. The blame for this is placed on NFU, the assumption being that a 'hard-nosed hawkish' first-use strategy would be better at deterring such aggressions.

Is this true? In a situation where every nuclear dyad faces an adversary equipped with a robust second strike capable of assured retaliation, can a nation undertake nuclear first use, suffer nuclear damage, and yet come out better in a conflict? If the answer to this is negative, as it should be given the damage that modern megacities will suffer from even modest fission weapons, then can the threat of first use be credible? And, if it is not, then why should it deter? But if first-use does not deter, then why do nuclear-armed countries have a first-use strategy? The answer lies in their specific compulsions. Pakistan prefers first use to deter India's conventional superiority, as do Russia (after briefly maintaining NFU between 1982 and 1993) and North Korea against the US. Washington, in turn, is hemmed in by its extended deterrence commitments and forced to retain NFU by its allies.

Despite the fact that seven nuclear weapon countries have first-use strategies, no nuclear use has taken place. This is because many dilemmas confound a first user.

### **When to Use a Nuclear Weapon?**

Unlike a country with NFU, whose only use of nuclear weapons is when these have been used against itself, a first user must define 'redlines' on when to employ these weapons - early in conflict; when facing military reversals; or an existential crisis? Militaries instinctively prefer offensive strategies. They like to seize the initiative, use surprise, execute their own pre-deliberated plans, and compel the adversary to follow their moves. As Barry Posen, a well-known military strategist, said, "A military organization prefers to fight its own war and prevent its adversary from doing so..."<sup>2</sup>

This approach, however, is not the best for nuclear weapons. The first use of nuclear weapons against an adversary that has a secure second-strike capability cannot ensure the ability to fight as per one's own plans. The pathways such a war may take are many, most of them likely to negate the benefits that the first user hoped to achieve.

It is often argued that a possessor of nuclear weapons is likely to use them if faced with the prospect of conventional defeat since it would then be left with no option. However, this assumption of nuclear use inevitability fails to evaluate how a country that was conventionally down could revive its prospects by using nuclear weapons. In fact, after having used these weapons, its fate would shift from being 'defeated now but living to fight another day' to one of

severe damage or annihilation depending on its geographical, material, and human capacities. Jonathan Schell articulated this dilemma: “For how can it make sense to ‘save’ one’s country by blowing it to pieces? And what logic is there in staving off a limited defeat by bringing on unlimited, eternal defeat?”<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, it is often questioned whether it would make sense to stick with NFU when the adversary is evidently preparing for a nuclear strike. Should not nuclear pre-emption then be an automatic response? The answer to this lies in understanding that spying preparation can still not be a guarantee of an imminent nuclear strike. The preparations could be part of the adversary’s strategy of ‘coercive diplomacy’. After all, many incidents involving the threat of the use of nuclear weapons actually intend coercion.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, despite an apparent show of readiness, there is a chance that nuclear weapons do not come into use. But by striking first in the face of apparent readiness, a country would certainly end up inviting retaliation. Can this be beneficial?

### **Where to Use a Nuclear Weapon?**

Can there be a ‘right’ target for nuclear first use? Militaries express preference for counterforce targeting of adversaries’ nuclear assets and related infrastructure to minimise their retaliatory options. So, the first strike should aim to disarm or decapitate. However, this would require an elaborate strike with good intelligence to know the adversary’s arsenal locations, targeting with accurate missiles, and sufficient capability to defend oneself against the adversary’s response with leftover assets. Not only is such capability difficult to build and logistics complex to execute, but the problem also lies in the proximity of military bases to civilian centres. Therefore, the distinction between counterforce and countervalue can be quite artificial, especially when using a weapon of mass destruction.

### **How to Use a Nuclear Weapon?**

Can there be a ‘right’ kind of first use? Would it suffice to use a small number of low-yield weapons against battlefield targets, largely to indicate resolve and signal further action if the adversary were to continue his offensive? Can a controlled nuclear first use halt ongoing military operations and help escape the possibility of retaliation? Or, would it be better to undertake large-scale first strikes on military and civilian targets that cripple a country materially and politically? Can this rule out the possibility of retaliation?

There can be no definitive answers to these questions. If a country has paid adequate attention to building a survivable, robust retaliatory force, there can never be a guarantee of no retaliation, irrespective of how the first use happens. The victim of first use may then choose to continue the conventional onslaught or escalate to a nuclear level. Thus, by introducing nuclear weapons, the first user enters the uncharted territory of nuclear war-fighting, which would now be determined by the adversary's response. By seemingly seizing the initiative, the first user has ended up inviting the spectre of nuclear retaliation. As pointed out by George Perkovich, an American nuclear analyst, "The escalatory implications of first use are at least partly why no state has tried to use nuclear weapons against a state that could retaliate in kind"<sup>5</sup>.

### **What Kind of Nuclear Arsenal to Build?**

Even a modicum of chance, let alone a guarantee, of a successful first strike requires a technologically and financially demanding slew of capabilities: a large arsenal of first strike weapons, such as accurate missiles with real-time navigational aids to ensure high precision, multiple independently retargetable vehicles to degrade hardened targets, sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to ensure real-time information on the adversary's arsenal, elaborate and delegated command and control to undertake simultaneous launches against dispersed forces, and a high level of active and passive defence capabilities to handle nuclear retaliation.

In contrast to the challenging demands of a credible first-use, NFU requirements can be relatively smaller and easier, focused on ensuring survivability. This means building hardened nuclear storage sites, ensuring deception, mobility, and dispersal over delivery vectors, and building redundancy into nuclear command, control, and communications. Of course, these are not easy or inexpensive by any means. Nothing in the nuclear domain is. But there is a difference in the quantitative and qualitative requirements of first-use and NFU.

### **Why Use a Nuclear Weapon?**

The USA confronted this question in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.<sup>6</sup> The country then had the nuclear wherewithal and a comprehensive targeting strategy to 'prevail' with the first use of nuclear weapons. Yet, President Kennedy's military leaders could not assure him that there would be no Soviet nuclear retaliation. And in the absence of such assurance, he dismissed every option

of first use as “a hell of an alternative.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, despite an offensive nuclear strategy, neither victory could be assured nor the extent of retaliatory damage could be considered acceptable.

In nearly all circumstances, the first use of nuclear weapons is likely to end up destroying, not protecting, the first user. In fact, with nuclear weapons, the first user’s advantage can prove to be elusive. The objectives *of killing the adversary’s resolve to fight through counter value or killing the adversary’s capability to fight through counterforce* are both fraught with suffering damage to oneself too.

### Benefits of NFU

Leaving complex questions to the first user, the military of an NFU country can adopt a relatively relaxed posture that does not strain the nuclear leash of a system at hair-trigger alert. It also eliminates the need for forward deployment or pre-delegation of authority. These reduce the possibility of accidental or unauthorised use, as well as nuclear use based on miscalculation or inadvertence.

The leadership, too, is freed from the pressure of making difficult decisions demanded by first use while simultaneously being weighed down by a nuclear taboo. In fact, the decision to retaliate could be relatively easier, seemingly legitimate, and guilt-free to make. Moreover, by placing the onus of escalation on the adversary while retaining the initiative of punitive nuclear retaliation, NFU lessens the possibility of deterrence breakdown and thus encourages the possibility of ‘no use’ instead of ‘sure use’.

NFU offers the additional advantage of alleviating the adversary’s sense of insecurity about losing his nuclear arsenal, or a part of it, to an adversary’s first use. A country living under the constant fear of an imminent nuclear strike would be tempted to use its nuclear force first. NFU helps to mitigate this ‘use or lose’ pressure and thereby lessens crisis instability. Counterintuitive though it may sound, removing the adversary from the edge and making it feel reassured by one’s NFU can be beneficial for oneself too. As Robert McNamara had explained, “I had no desire to face, in a period of tension, an adversary who felt cornered, panicky and desperate and who might be tempted to move irrationally.”<sup>8</sup>

The value of this reassurance is evident in the Sino-Indian military stand-off that has continued for over three years now, and yet the nuclear word has not been uttered since both sides profess NFU. This is an example that could be emulated by other nuclear dyads as a nuclear risk reduction measure. Indeed, NFU makes for a credible, militarily defensible nuclear deterrence strategy that also contributes to regional stability and international security.

### **NFU Vs Ambiguity**

In recent times, strategists and military planners have highlighted the growing risks to nuclear forces from precision strikes by conventional missiles, cyber-attacks on nuclear command and control, and the use of artificial intelligence. These are expected to compromise the survivability of retaliatory forces. It is being argued that these developments would/should move NFU countries to more ambiguous postures to deter by keeping the adversary guessing rather than by offering the assurance of NFU.

While these developments are worrisome, do they merit abandoning the NFU or attaching conditionalities to it? Would the threat of using nuclear weapons in response to conventional attacks on nuclear assets enhance deterrence? Would not the same dilemmas of first use arise, as already mentioned in the earlier part of the article? To arrive at some answers, it is first imperative to undertake a considered evaluation of the damage that the adversary's conventional missiles or cyber-attacks can cause to one's nuclear capability. In the case of India, China's conventional missiles currently do not have the necessary accuracy or kinetic power to overwhelm India's nuclear assets. Nor does it have the defences to shield itself from a retaliatory attack meant to cause unacceptable damage. Of course, China might acquire such capabilities over time. But then, India, too, would have moved ahead in its own survivability measures.

Secondly, the dilemmas of first use can be avoided by enhancing the credibility, effectiveness, and reliability of NFU by building strength in retaliation. It is the promise of assured retaliation that deters, not the technological ease of first use. This logic of deterrence is immutable. Therefore, the credibility of the NFU mandates building sufficient forces for retaliation and prioritising their survivability, a subject on which future issues of *NuClearly Put* will dwell more. Additionally, it would also be beneficial to negotiate arms control measures such as limiting the deployment of missile defence systems, agreements prohibiting cyber-attacks on nuclear



command and control architecture, and reinforcing the norm of non-use of nuclear weapons. The value of the nuclear taboo should not be underestimated.

Finally, it needs to be said that the NFU does not make India a dove. K. Subrahmanyam wrote 20 years ago, “A nuclear hawk in charge of Indian nuclear button will be a disaster. One hopes there are no nuclear hawks among the leaderships of any of our major political parties.”<sup>9</sup>

***(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])***

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact of Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 274).

<sup>2</sup> Barry R Posen, “The Sources of Military Doctrine”, in Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz ed. *The Use of Force: Military Power and International Politics* (Boulder, Colorado: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), p 24.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Schell, *The Abolition* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 54

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive list of incidents until 1996 see Jasjit Singh, “Why Nuclear Weapons”, in Jasjit Singh ed., *Nuclear India* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 1998), pp 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> George Perkovich, *Do Unto Others: Towards a Defensible Nuclear Doctrine* (Washington DC: Carnegie, 2013), p.10

<sup>6</sup> In 2015, the US National Archives and Records Administration released a detailed list of the US targets in the USSR called “Atomic Weapons Requirements Study for 1959”. It was produced by the Strategic Air Command in 1956, identifying bombers as the primary means of delivery. See Scott Shane, “1950s US Nuclear Target List Offers Chilling Insights”, *The New York Times*, December 22, 2015

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Daryl G Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 120.

<sup>8</sup> Robert McNamara, *Blundering into Disaster: Surviving the First Century of the Nuclear Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), pp. 13-14

<sup>9</sup> K Subrahmanyam, “Politics of Security: When Vajpayee said ‘No’ to Going Nuclear”, *Times of India*, Apr 10, 2004

#### Recommended Readings:

- George Perkovich, *Do Unto Others: Towards a Defensible Nuclear Doctrine* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Piece, 2013)
- Prakash Menon and Aditya Ramanathan eds., *The Sheathed Sword: From Nuclear Brink to No First Use* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2022)

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- Barry Blechman, *Unlocking the Road to Nuclear Zero: Perspectives of Advanced Nuclear Nations – China and India* (Washington DC: Stimson Center,
  - Steven Fetter and Jon Wolfsthal, “No First Use and Credible Deterrence”, *Journal for Peace and Disarmament*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2018.
  - Pan Zhenqiang, “China’s No First Use of Nuclear Weapons”, Tong Zhao and Li Bin eds., *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016)
  - Manpreet Sethi, “Using Nuclear Weapons First: ‘A Hell of an Alternative’”, *Air Power Journal*, vol.8, no.5, Winter 2013.

