

NO MORE AMBIGUITY: INDIA'S NUCLEAR POLICY



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IN 1998, INDIA TRANSFORMED ITS STATUS TO A NUCLEAR WEAPON STATE. ITS NUCLEAR POLICY IS BASED ON TWO PILLARS: MINIMUM DETERRENCE AND NO FIRST USE.

BY VIJAI K. NAIR

Without abandoning its belief in the propriety of total nuclear disarmament, India bucked U.S. pressure and world opinion in 1998 to transform its status to a nuclear weapon state. India's apparently contradictory national security policy is the product of history. It is the product of the Indian establishment's exceptional understanding of the dynamics of the global nuclear weapons environment as it developed and sensitivity to the changing implications for the nation's security interests.

In 1947, lacking the political experience of governments guiding their states through the modern-day jungle of inter-

national relations, the leadership of newly-independent India saw nuclear weapons as a destabilizing factor that threatened the global security environment within which India had to exist as a sovereign nation. The conviction that nuclear weapons are abhorrent to the larger human values and that their possession — by whomever or however few — is a threat to mankind as a whole characterized the times. This view was forcefully articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru, who, as India's prime minister and his own foreign minister, steered

India is a nuclear weapon state. This is a reality that cannot be denied. It is not a conferment that we seek; nor is it a status for others to grant. The call made in the [U.N. Security Council] Resolution that we should stop our nuclear programs or missile programs is unacceptable. Decisions in this regard will be taken by the government on the basis of our own assessments and national security requirements, in a reasonable and responsible manner.

— Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee,
June 8, 1998, in a statement before the
Upper House of Parliament in response to
U.N. Security Council Resolution 1172.

India through its first 17 years. During this time India became a leading proponent for the cause of total and complete nuclear disarmament, a philosophy that remains a bedrock of Indian policy even today.

The victors of the second world war, the only states that had acquired the phenomenal power accruing from the possession of nuclear weapons, were quite happy to

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humor Nehru along on the assumption that his exhortations on behalf of disarmament would help contain lateral proliferation of nuclear weapons to the original coterie. Of great consequence for India as the Cold War era unfolded was the fact that the U.S. and its Western Bloc allies adopted an "if you aren't with us you're against us" view toward India: they perceived India's nuclear weapon potential as a threat to their national interests, and proceeded to evolve and implement a wide range of so-called disarmament policies that threatened

the existence of India's sovereign nuclear option.

As it happened, Nehru's idealistic belief in the goodness of man and a global brotherhood was abruptly shattered in 1962 when Chinese President Mao Zedong surreptitiously took over 30,000 square kilometers of Indian territory in the Aksai Chin plateau and unleashed the People's Liberation Army through Sikkim and the North East Frontier Agency (now the state of Arunachal Pradesh) to deliver a stunning defeat to the Indian military. (China claims yet another 90,000 square kilometers of Indian territory in the eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, a claim Beijing supported by military offensives in 1967 and 1987 and continues to make with regular frequency to this day.) The main fallout of this conflict did not materialize until 1964, when China crossed the nuclear threshold, bringing about an exponential increment in its power quotient and bringing the effect of nuclear weaponry directly to bear on India's national security perceptions.

The dilemma for India was whether to sign on the dotted line of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and eschew nuclear weapons in keeping with its basic philosophy of nuclear disarmament, or to actively pursue the nuclear option to deter China from factoring its nuclear capability, legitimized by the NPT, to seize the territories it claimed. It was becoming clear to the Indian leadership that the nuclear nonproliferation drive was not meant as a step toward disarmament, but rather to legitimize the

selective possession and use of nuclear weapons for national and collective security. India's embrace of the Eisenhower Atoms for Peace program and pursuit of nuclear technology for power and other peaceful means had, in effect, given it the potential to exercise the "nuclear option" if the security environment required. In the event, the Indian leadership decided to walk two seemingly incongruous strategic paths at once — espousing the cause of nuclear disarmament, on the one hand, and simultaneously creating a fallback capability to deter China in the event real and total nuclear disarmament failed to materialize.

All this is water under the bridge — albeit water that drove the wheel that turned India's evolution into a nuclear weapon state in 1998. But what is India's current nuclear policy? How does it fit into the larger matrix of American strategies? And what part might it play in driving the dynamics of nuclear strategies among India's friends and foes?

An Unambiguous Policy

India's nuclear policy is articulated unambiguously in the *Annual Report 2001-2002* of the Ministry of Defense, put before parliament in March. As the *Report* states: "India remains a consistent proponent of general and complete disarmament and attaches the highest priority to global nuclear disarmament. India's policy on disarmament also takes into account changes that have taken place in the world, especially in the 1990s. The nuclear tests of May 1998 do not dilute India's commitment to this long-held objective. ... As a nuclear weapon state, India is even more conscious of its responsibility in this regard and, as in the past, initiatives in pursuit of global nuclear disarmament continue to be taken. ..."

The *Report* further states: "India's nuclear weapons capability is meant only for self-defense and seeks only to ensure that India's security, independence and integrity are not threatened in future. India is not interested in a nuclear arms race. This is the rationale behind the two pillars of India's nuclear policy — minimum deterrence and no-first-use." The document also explicitly rejects war-fighting doctrines and the concept of launch-on-warning.

India's nuclear weapons policy requires, further, that the following be assured:

- Absolute and positive control by the highest civilian authority of all national strategic assets so that strategic weapon systems are not used outside the para-

meters of nationally legitimized policy.

- Low-level alert status of strategic forces to preclude any possibility of an accidental or unauthorized launch, and assure that a reaction by strategic forces complies with the conflict status.

- A deployment policy that gives the political leadership confidence that the proposed launch sequence is not jeopardized by a pre-emptive nuclear strike by an adversary. This would include a built-in guarantee of retaliation if the situation so demands.

- A moderate force level, well within the national technological and resource horizons, so that it does not upend the national socio-economic well-being.

The closest New Delhi has come to spelling out its nuclear doctrine is the *Draft Nuclear Doctrine*, released Aug. 17, 1999, by the National Security Advisory Board. The merit of this document lies in the fact that for the first time ever the Indian government made public its thought process on evolving nuclear security policies, a critical step in the development of a nuclear weapons strategy and its management policy. The draft doctrine lays out the broad parameters for development of India's nuclear strategy, which is predicated on fielding a minimum credible deterrent, a weapons capability based on a 'triad' (a capability to deploy and launch nuclear weapons from platforms on land, at sea or in the air) and limited to retaliation-specific situations.

According to the draft doctrine, India will only initiate a nuclear attack in retaliation to a nuclear strike on its civil and military assets: any nuclear attack on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor. The magnitude of the retaliation clearly points to 'counter-value' targets, or area targets having a high density of population and economic infrastructure. Deputy Chief of Army Staff Lt. Gen. Raj Kadyan recently explained: "India has maintained that even a tactical nuclear strike on its forces will be treated as a nuclear first strike, and shall invite massive retaliation."

India has proceeded with development and induction of systems, infrastructure and hardware to include:

- **Delivery systems** that would reliably penetrate hostile airspace in the technological environment that will prevail two decades into the future; and reach extreme ranges prescribed by the nation's nuclear strategy from secure launch sites, both mobile and static, from sea, land or air. In the existing environment this entails an IRBM

that would threaten retaliation against targets visualized 360 degrees around India; subsurface launched missiles to guarantee survival of the strategic deterrent; and cruise missiles to enhance accuracy and penetration.

- A **warhead inventory** in keeping with the targeting policy dictated by the nuclear strategy, with yields commensurate to the required levels of target punishment dictated by strategy.

- A national policy for **integrated command and control** with an enlightened leadership.

- **Validation of hardware** to be incorporated in the nuclear infrastructure, some of which may have to be tested under pressures and temperatures of a nuclear explosion.

Threat Assessment

The *Draft Nuclear Doctrine* is predicated on assumptions that have been identified and resolutely adhered to by successive Congress, United Front and BJP regimes. First among them is the recognition that nuclear weapons remain instruments for national and collective security, the possession of which on a selective basis has been sought to be legitimized through permanent extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in May 1995. Second, India has no intention of rolling back its nuclear weapons strategy, as has been clearly stated through its rejection of the resolution of the Sixth NPT Review Conference calling for such a reversal.

India's nuclear policy, its nuclear doctrine and nuclear strategy are structured to cope with four very disparate threat perceptions. They are:

China. In addition to occupying large tracts of Indian territory, China rejects Indian sovereignty over Sikkim, and lays claim to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh up to the Brahmaputra River in the Assam plains. India's concerns also include China's defense cooperation with Myanmar, its deployment of surveillance and communication systems on the Coco Islands, acquisition of strategic port facilities and the construction of strategic surface communications connecting Yunnan Province to the Andaman Sea, its assistance to Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs (documented in *Jane's Intelligence Review* and *Time* magazine, among other places), and its frequent incursions across the line of actual control.

No progress whatsoever has been made on the border dispute by the Joint Working Group and its specialist cell, the Experts Working Group, set up soon after the

Agreement for Peace and Tranquility was signed in 1993, as the first step in a hoped-for dialogue. The stonewalling tactics Beijing has employed indicate that it has no desire to resolve the Sino-Indian territorial issue now, or in the near future, pointing to a conflict of interests with China in the long term.

Not only is China a long-established nuclear weapon state with a carefully thought-out nuclear strategy in place, but it continues to take gigantic strides in modernizing and increasing its nuclear arsenal. The country is creating a subsurface nuclear capability that gives it the potential to deploy nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean. China has also tested and produced tactical nuclear weapons, and introduced a nuclear war-fighting doctrine in the PLA for use against qualitatively superior conventional forces. Further, China's nuclear doctrine includes use of nuclear weapons to settle territorial disputes and its 'no-first-use' strategy is directed only toward non-nuclear weapon states, a group from which India was excluded well before May 1998.

If China were to resort to armed conflict to resolve its territorial claims along India's northern borders, it would find itself logistically handicapped and pitted against a qualitatively superior force. Under the circumstances, it may resort to localized tactical nuclear strikes to facilitate achievement of its military objective. Although China's current deployment of its strategic assets suggests a land-based threat from the north, New Delhi cannot rule out employment through Myanmar on its eastern flank or the threat from sea-based nuclear weapons that the expanding potential of the PLA Navy and the bases China is creating in the Andaman Sea off the coast of Myanmar potentially afford.

Pakistan. The threat from Pakistan is equally explicit and immediate. Having created a nuclear weapons capability, Pakistan has met the imperatives for a deployment policy and has articulated a policy, which unabashedly links the nuclear weapons program to its ongoing hostility with India. Ambassador Munir Akram threatened to use nuclear weapons to wrest control of Kashmir from India at the United Nations on May 25, and was echoed by similar rhetoric from Pakistani President Musharraf in Islamabad. New Delhi must assume that Islamabad's recently-created National Command Authority has formulated an employment policy directed toward India, even though Pakistan's recent round of nuclear missile-mongering is aimed more at drawing international inter-

vention into its dispute with India. The verbal threats from Pakistan's leadership were meant not so much to deter India from launching an offensive into Pakistan to destroy Islamabad's surrogate terrorist infrastructure as they were designed to heighten international concerns to a level that would force extra-regional powers to intervene in Kashmir on behalf of Pakistan.

New Delhi is fully aware of the infirmities of Pakistan's nuclear potential and its strategic disadvantages (reports in the Western media notwithstanding), whereby a nuclear exchange would result in its annihilation as a nation-state even though it may be able to inflict considerable death and destruction on India. As far as the actual act of a nuclear strike against India is concerned, Pakistan seems more than adequately deterred. And, given India's no-first-use policy and the fact that its nuclear capability was not developed to deal with the military threat from Pakistan, in any case, Pakistan has no cause to fear a nuclear attack from India. But it would be a serious miscalculation on the part of Pakistan and

Western governments to infer that India is deterred from initiating a conventional strike to wipe out terrorist camps in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir by Pakistan's nuclear weapons capability at this point in history.

Counterproliferation. Yet another threat — one which may not necessarily involve nuclear weapons — emanates from the philosophy of counterproliferation espoused by the U.S. and the strategic means it has developed and incorporated into the war fighting doctrines of its theater commands. Counterproliferation refers to the use of military action to prevent proliferation or disarm proliferate countries. In spite of a limited estrangement in U.S.-Pakistani relations in the 1990s, they are today full-fledged allies in a war against terrorism, with troops conjointly addressing the Taliban and al-Qaida operating in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Under these conditions the U.S. strategy clearly lays down that the theater commander must initiate counterproliferation operations designed to destroy all nuclear weapon systems and attendant national nuclear infrastructure of any country that

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goes to war with its ally. India cannot turn a blind eye to such a possibility, and needs to include certain defensive measures to safeguard its strategic assets and wherewithal.

Restrictions on Trade and Development. Last but not least is the threat posed to India's capacity to keep its nuclear arsenal contemporary to the changing dynamics of nuclear capabilities and doctrines among the nuclear weapon states. Failure to keep the nuclear capability current would soon render its "minimum credible deterrent" redundant in the face of the capabilities being developed and deployed by China. This threat comes in the form of the imposition of restrictive technology transfer regimes (such as the Australia Club, the London Club, the Wassenaar Arrangement, the Missile Technology Control Regime, etc.) and the manipulation of the arms control regime by the developed countries, which would prefer to see India's nuclear potential wither in keeping with the basic tenets of the NPT — i.e., limiting nuclear weapons capabilities to the five original nuclear weapon states.

The Indo-U.S. Equation

India does not perceive a threat from the U.S. in the foreseeable future and has no intention of developing strategic capabilities that would cause the U.S. security concerns. However, the Indian strategic force structures could have an incidental effect on U.S. forces deployed in the Asian region as a consequence of its requirements to deter China. The benign nature of the overall Indo-U.S. relationship, therefore, suggests the value of instituting appropriate confidence-building measures, provided U.S. nonproliferation policy permits, to alleviate the fallout of this incidental capability.

New Delhi recognizes that it is in the common interests of both India and the U.S. to ensure that their strategic competencies do not facilitate proliferation to other states and non-state entities. It is similarly in the interest of both parties to institutionalize a practicable fissile material control regime that would deny access to fissile materials to possible proliferators and cap their own inventories at a level that would ensure the continued efficacy of their



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strategic forces, maritime propulsion assets and other strategic systems. India has taken active measures to deny nuclear weapons technology, materials and equipment to non-nuclear weapon states through suitable controls on national assets, a credible export control regime and a matching enforcement policy.

Each country has security concerns for which it exercises its sovereign prerogative to formulate, develop and implement specific policies and capabilities. If the U.S. has come to the determination that it needs to create a suitable national missile defense system in deference to its national security interests, India is not one to be critical, especially as such a defensive measure does not impinge directly on its national security. By the same logic, India reserves its sovereign right to upgrade its own strategic capabilities to meet the changes in the regional nuclear environment that may be brought about by China as a consequence of its perceptions of the impact of the U.S. national missile defense system on its own nuclear weapons capabili-

ties. Modifications to India's strategic forces would, perforce, be limited to meeting the regional threat and therefore have no bearing on U.S. national interests.

In conclusion, India fully recognizes that the world today is markedly unipolar, with the U.S. the single superpower, and therefore it needs to understand how Washington views India's role in this strategic scenario so that it can be sensitive to American concerns. At the same time the U.S., with its exponential power quotient, is expected to understand the legitimate concerns of the states to which it relates. New Delhi unabashedly acknowledges the pre-eminence of the U.S. and expects to develop a positive relationship with Washington — but in doing so it cannot abdicate its sovereign responsibility to secure the state's national interests by all means necessary, including nuclear weaponry, over which it has unqualified control. The nuclear threat is real and live — a threat that requires India to generate and field the means to defend itself without falling back on external beneficence. ■

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