

# IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# 'No First Use' is Not Sacrosanct: Need a Theatre-Specific Posture for Flexible Options

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## **S***ummary*

Nuclear doctrines and postures are dynamic processes that evolve with the security environment, and can neither be treated as sacrosanct nor equated with characteristics like 'responsibility'. Having passed through many postural realignments and signalling initiatives in the two decades after it was first drafted, the time is now ripe for a comprehensive review and revision of India's nuclear doctrine, especially to explore theatre-specific postures in place of a uniform approach to two different nuclear dyads.

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What would be the response of India if it comes across credible intelligence that Pakistan is preparing to launch nuclear-armed missiles as a means to escalate military hostilities? Would India wait for Pakistan to undertake a nuclear first strike, possibly on a major population centre like the National Capital Region (NCR), killing a million or more, and then mobilise its second-strike forces to strike Pakistan and inflict “unacceptable damage,” as India’s Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) of 1999 proclaims?<sup>1</sup> Or, instead, would it undertake a pre-emptive strike – either through a conventional air strike or with nuclear-tipped short/interim-range missiles – on Pakistani bases gearing up for striking targets in India?

This has been a troubling question repeatedly posed to the Indian security establishment. Hitherto, it has not provided a direct answer, preferring to reiterate the sanctity of the no-first-use (NFU) posture underlying India’s nuclear doctrine and deterrent as well as emphasising that the doctrine is more of a ‘declaratory’ political statement (in order to deter nuclear blackmail) than a war-fighting posture.<sup>2</sup> Votaries of NFU believe that it aptly reflects India’s moralistic ethos of a peaceful nation that uses its nuclear weapons responsibly even if the posture is inconsistent with the threat environment, denoted by two nuclear-armed rivals with characteristically different postures.

Pakistan, in fact, has been sceptical about India’s NFU posture from the outset and had decided against publicising its nuclear doctrine, all the while keeping its nuclear posture ambiguous and strike options open. Pakistan used this ambiguity optimally in the first decade of overt nuclearisation in South Asia (i.e., since 1998) and made political gains from nuclear brinkmanship. However, the situation subsequently changed as the spotlight fell on Pakistan’s status as a hub of terrorism and clandestine nuclear trade.

Pakistan’s one-upmanship during the initial years of its nuclearisation had placed immense pressure on India’s NFU posture and had triggered demands for its revision in order to effectively deal with the volatility involving two nuclear-armed neighbours. The recent remark by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh indicating that NFU is not ‘cast in stone’ and can be altered if the circumstances demand so,<sup>3</sup> is the latest reflection on NFU-centric doctrine not being robust enough. He was echoing a pronouncement in the DND that the doctrine (or some of its elements) will be “a dynamic concept related to the strategic environment, technological imperatives and

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<sup>1</sup> See [“Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine,”](#) *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, August 17, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the issue, see Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy*, Penguin Random House, Gurgaon, 2016; and Verghese Koithara, *Managing India’s Nuclear Forces*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Shubhajit Roy, [“A nuke flutter from careful Rajnath: No-first-use may not be cast in stone,”](#) *The Indian Express*, New Delhi, August 17, 2019; and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui and G.S. Mudur, [“No-first-use not cast in stone, says Rajnath Singh,”](#) *The Telegraph*, August 17, 2019.

the needs of national security,”<sup>4</sup> implying the imperativeness of review and upgradation. A closer look at the evolution of India’s nuclear postures in the last two decades, however, reveal the numerous doctrinal realignments and signalling exercises that India had initiated to adapt to the ever-transforming threat calculus, though short of altering the fundamental NFU-centric doctrinal framework.

### **NFU as a Strategic Burden**

A foremost scepticism about India’s NFU posture is on its credibility and robustness when it equates with only one (China) of the nuclear rivals and creates a vacuum for the other (Pakistan) to exploit. Pakistan has been running a prolonged low-intensity conflict (LIC) against India, which predates the 1998 tests and had for long denied the space for an Indian response by threatening to escalate to nuclear use if India crossed any of its ‘perceived’ thresholds. This skewed equation, in fact, had its genesis in the covert nuclearisation phase when Gen. Zia-ul-Haq reportedly warned India during Operation Brasstacks (1987) that “if you cross the border by an inch, we will annihilate your cities.” The nuclear tests only emboldened this strategy further as was evident from the blackmail and brinkmanship that Pakistan indulged in during various crises in the post-1998 years.

Besides citing India’s conventional military superiority as the rationale to keep its nuclear use options open, many semi-official elucidations by Pakistan’s security establishment about the redlines added to the deliberate ambiguity. So much so that Lt. Gen. Khalid Kidwai’s (a long time head of Pakistan’s Strategic Plans Division) articulation in 2002 appeared to be the saner of the lot.<sup>5</sup> That such belligerent posturing had effectively deterred India is illustrated by its refusal to cross the Line of Control (LoC) during various crises of the initial years, even as the NFU became a self-restrainer denying the space for escalation dominance. The efforts since 2001 were to unshackle itself from this condition which led to the pursuit of new game-plans for military responses to the LIC without hitting the presumed redlines or

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<sup>4</sup> The specific reference is to the credible minimum deterrence, wherein the ‘credibility’ of the arsenal in terms of posturing and capabilities and the ‘minimum’ in terms of the size of the arsenal has to be dynamically determined, especially in the light of the two nuclear armed rivals, and this cannot be done in isolation without the consideration of the other postural and doctrinal elements.

<sup>5</sup> According to Lt. Gen. Khalid Kidwai, Pakistan would resort to the use of nuclear weapons under four circumstances: (a) India attacking and conquering a large part of its territory (b) India destroying a large part either of its land or air forces (c) India proceeding to the economic strangling of the country, and (d) pushing Pakistan into political destabilisation or creating a large-scale internal subversion. See Paolo Cotta-Ramusino and Maurizio Martellini, [“Nuclear Safety, Nuclear Stability and Nuclear Strategy in Pakistan.”](#) A Concise Report of a Visit by Landau Network - Centro Volta, Como, Italy, January 14, 2002.

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initiating doctrinal revisions, resulting in concepts like the Cold Start,<sup>6</sup> as well as technological options like the Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD).<sup>7</sup>

Pakistan, in turn, rapidly developed a tactical nuclear capability (Nasr) to counter the Cold Start strategy and declared that it could target Indian forces crossing into Pakistan territory, though New Delhi refused to get into a tactical equation despite having the capability for a technological riposte (Prahaar).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, it led to a postural shift in Pakistan’s deterrence calculus as exemplified by its adoption of a second-strike capability in 2012, followed by projection of a full-spectrum deterrence.<sup>9</sup> The latter entailed development of capabilities for all the threat environments: cruise missiles (Ra’ad and Babar) to tackle India’s BMD systems, and Nasr against the Cold Start and a fledgling offensive force, including Shaheen-III to hit India’s far-flung strategic zones, etc.<sup>10</sup>

The moot point is that while the nuclear deterrence spectrum witnessed evolution and maturity, the NFU loophole continued to be exploited until the surgical strikes of September 2016 (following a terror attack at Uri army camp), which became not just a demonstration of the new political leadership’s resolve to ‘cross the border’ as a perceptive redline and call Pakistan’s ‘nuclear bluff,’ but also undertake military operations under a nuclear overhang without jettisoning the doctrinal underpinnings of the NFU.<sup>11</sup> Three years down the line, these political objectives were reinforced when the leadership repeated the feat with greater intensity, through air strikes on

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<sup>6</sup> The Cold Start strategy was supposed to be Indian Army’s attempt to carve a space for limited conventional responses to Pakistan-aided low intensity conflict without hitting its perceived nuclear thresholds. The strategy reportedly involved reorganising of three strike corps into eight integrated battle groups (involving air and naval elements as well) that could launch multiple attacks on the Pakistan territory (including terror camps and Pakistani strike corps assets) even as a holding corps will act as pivot force and give defensive support and hold the captured territory.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of the BMD spectrum, see Chapter V in A. Vinod Kumar, *A Shield against the Bomb: Ballistic Missile Defence in a Nuclear Environment*, Vij Books, New Delhi, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Though Prahaar, with a 150-300 km range, could be developed as a delivery vehicle for tactical nuclear warheads, many voices warn against pushing for a tactical envelope with rapid escalatory potential. Former DRDO chief, V.K. Saraswat, had confirmed its ongoing development in a talk at IDSA in February 2017, though refusing to confirm whether it will be a tactical nuclear delivery capability. For an analysis, see Vivek Bhardwaj, [“USA’s MGM-140 ATACMS vs. India’s Prahaar vs. Pakistan’s Nasr, Tactical Ballistic Missile Comparison.”](#) *AerMech*, January 10, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Pakistan’s ‘second-strike’ forces are supposedly based on Agosta submarines, though it is unknown how far it has succeeded in developing a naval leg of its triad. See “Naval Chief Inaugurates Naval Strategic Forces Headquarters,” No. PR122/2012-ISPR, May 19, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The reference is to the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, where Pakistan believes India has strategic assets stationed. For more on the full spectrum plan, see [“A Conversation with Gen. Khalid Kidwai.”](#) Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference 2015, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 23, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Surendra Singh, [“This is How 19 Indian Soldiers Did Surgical Strike in PoK, And Avenged the Uri Terror Attack.”](#) *India Times*, February 09, 2017.

a terror camp in Balakot in February 2019.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, the aerial strikes were proof of India now taking over the escalation mantle and signalling its resolve to advance up the ladder (towards missile strikes) in the event of continuing terror attacks and if Pakistan were to seek military retribution to the Indian action, as seen after the Balakot event.

With the recent Indian action in Jammu and Kashmir ruffling the Pakistan security establishment, which is seemingly girding its loins for a fresh offensive, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh’s statement was not just a reiteration of the political intent for cross-border military missions, but also a signalling exercise that no elements of India’s nuclear doctrine, including NFU, will restrain it from moving up the escalation ladder if the situation so demands.

### **Nuclear Posture is All About Signalling**

It was surprising for observers of the South Asian nuclear scene as to why such a meticulously planned and resource-intensive initiative like the ‘Cold Start’ was disowned by the political leadership. Army officials involved in this exercise insist that the supposed ‘Cold Start’ was only one among a handful of proactive tactical strike plans that were to be employed if the political leadership decides to undertake military action in response to a terror strike.<sup>13</sup> In fact, when elements of the Cold Start were tested on the western frontier, Army officials were aware that their Pakistan counterparts were closely monitoring the exercises and dissecting its contours.

Considering that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government, despite promoting a proactive national security mission, had not sought to revive or institutionalise the Cold Start plan, which was discarded by its predecessor, could be indicative of the fact that this project was a calculated signalling exercise intended to alarm Pakistan of the conventional campaigns that India could devise. While objectives like ‘conquering and holding territory without hitting redlines’ may sound ambitious even for such spectacular projects, one cannot rule out the possibility that the surgical strike of 2016 could have been among the models (of controlled sub-conventional assaults) that comprised the larger framework of the Cold Start.

Another major signalling exercise was the Indian response to the Nasr episode. With Pakistan demonising the Cold Start as a destabilising strategy and swiftly developing a tactical nuclear delivery capability to counter it, the Indian establishment was looking for a requisite response without affecting its doctrinal setup and

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<sup>12</sup> [“Balakot IAF strike involved 200 hours of planning,”](#) *Business Standard*, February 26, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with army officials who were part of the exercises.

technological missions. The opening probably came when Pakistan declared that it might use tactical nuclear weapons against the Indian forces even if it was on its own soil. In the discussions that followed, it was at the initiative of the then foreign secretary that a decision was taken to use unofficial channels to signal India’s approach towards Nasr and the tactical nuclear space.<sup>14</sup> Shyam Saran, as Chairman of India’s National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), an advisory body without any official or statutory standing, fitted the bill. Through two different articulations, Saran clarified that India will not differentiate between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons and therefore will consider any such use against its forces or territory as a first-strike, which, implicitly, could invite a massive retaliation involving nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup>

The doctrinal debates were sealed for a brief period, until the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) declared in its 2014 *Lok Sabha* election manifesto its intent to “study in detail India’s nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times,” without, however, making any explicit reference to NFU.<sup>16</sup> Two years later, in November 2016, then Defence Minister Manohar Parikkar’s ‘private thoughts’ on “why should India tie itself to NFU?” was also passed off as a reflection of this thought process – the imperative of reviewing the doctrine periodically.<sup>17</sup> While Defence Minister Singh’s recent statement might be embodying such proclivities, the timing of the statement indicates that it could be more of a signalling to Pakistan in the light of its sabre-rattling over the latest developments relating to Jammu and Kashmir. With the Pakistan premier warning of an impending war, he needed to be warned that the outcome may not be one of his choosing. By that standard, the Defence Minister’s statement qualifies as a potent signalling, on par with the Saran’s statements.

## Why a Review-Cum-Revision is Needed

*A theatre-specific posture:* NFU as a postural option remains stressed by the unstable deterrence equations with Pakistan, unlike the case in the other dyad where China shares the same posture. A theatre-specific posturing, in place of a uniform posture for two characteristically different nuclear dyads, would signal to the adversary the operational flexibilities designed into India’s doctrinal structures as well as the scope

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<sup>14</sup> Based on an interaction with an official privy to the discussions.

<sup>15</sup> The first was through a lecture delivered at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi on April 24, 2013. For the text of Ambassador Shyam Saran’s lecture, see [“Is India’s Nuclear Deterrent Credible?”](#) *Research and Information System for Developing Countries*, New Delhi. The second came as an op-ed piece a few days later. See Shyam Saran, [“Weapon that has more than symbolic value.”](#) *The Hindu*, May 04, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> [“Full Text: BJP manifesto for 2014 Lok Sabha elections.”](#) *News18*, April 07, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Sushant Singh, [“Manohar Parrikar questions India’s no-first-use policy, adds ‘my thinking’.”](#) *The Indian Express*, November 11, 2016.

for their further recalibration if conditions demand so.<sup>18</sup> The idea is to project the flexibility that India has in applying the NFU only for theatres where the rival state (China) also has a similar posture while keeping its options open for other theatres (Pakistan), where no such articulation exists or where other nuclear use preferences are indicated.

Though the larger plan is to convey the non-applicability of NFU against Pakistan in the event of a conventional stalemate or threat of nuclear use, this should not necessarily imply that India could resort to a default protocol of nuclear strike options after an escalatory Pakistani conventional surge, but, instead, only formalises its flexible response options. Whether this needs to be done as an interpretative or signalling exercise (Shyam Saran model) or pursued through a doctrinal revision publicised through a cabinet note/press release, is something the government could decide if and when it initiates such an exercise.<sup>19</sup>

*Reflect new strategic scenarios:* Largely of the 1999 vintage, the DND is seen as falling short in many scenarios involving newer platforms like tactical nuclear weapons and missile defence, besides missing out on principles pertaining to counter-force or counter-value targeting choices. Though the Nasr element was tackled through interpretative manoeuvring, the doctrine needs to incorporate a clear guideline on tactical scenarios, particularly since it may involve an attack on the Indian troops in a foreign territory as well as a potential introduction of an Indian tactical system into the matrix. Considering that India has the technological capability to fight and dominate in the tactical domain, it would be unwise to evade a war-fighting space of lighter intensity and lesser destructive scope instead of galloping to a holocaustic endgame.

The fledgling missile defence capability also needs rapid integration into the doctrinal space as the fundamental objective behind a nation-wide shield would be to defend against nuclear-tipped missiles of various hues. Though the technology is not yet fool-proof or operationally mature, the BMD systems are integral to all nuclear strike scenarios, be it pre-emptive, offensive, or retaliatory. If their primary task is to provide frontline defence against a first strike by protecting population centres and second-strike capabilities, the alternative scenario is of the incentives to strike first

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<sup>18</sup> Author had first proposed the idea of a theatre-specific posturing in his unpublished paper, titled, “Low Intensity Conflict under Nuclear Conditions,” presented at IDSA in 2009. Senior officials present at this discussion opined that the National Security Council as well as the National Security Advisory Board had debated the question of whether India will wait to absorb a nuclear first strike and then resort to massive retaliation, and that the consensus was to stick to the existing posture and leave the final strike decision to the command and control structures that have been established.

<sup>19</sup> It is worthwhile to note that the DND was formalised after the Cabinet Committee on Security approved the draft with a few changes and publicised it through a press release. See [“Cabinet Committee on Security Reviews Progress in Operationalising India’s Nuclear Doctrine,”](#) *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, January 04, 2003.

– as a pre-emptive or a conquest mission – against an adversary with the assurance that retaliation will be sufficiently countered. It is, hence, vital that the missile defence roles and objectives are well articulated in the nuclear doctrinal framework, when revised. This exercise should also facilitate the transfer of BMD assets from the Indian Air Force to the Strategic Forces Command in order to fully integrate them with the strategic mission.

## Conclusion

The irony about nuclear doctrines is that the NFU posture, which is supposed to be an exemplar of peaceful intentions, has been scrutinised more often than the more belligerent versions. Nuclear doctrines and postures are dynamic processes that evolve with the security environment, and, hence, can neither be treated as sacrosanct policies nor equated with characteristics like ‘responsibility’, especially since only two of the nine nuclear-armed states adopt defensive postures like NFU.

India’s doctrinal framework has also undergone notable changes from its original ideational framework, through both structural alterations as well as postural realignments. The revisions pertaining to biological and chemical attacks as well as the inclusion of attack on Indian forces among the conditionalities for ‘retaliation’ are examples of how the core tenets have been revisited. The purported re-interpretation by a former national security advisor on the provision of non-use against non-nuclear weapon states<sup>20</sup> and Shyam Saran’s signalling endeavour are examples of how the strategic milieu will force enduring pressures on the doctrinal structures to transform and adapt.

Twenty years after the Indian nuclear doctrine was first drafted, the time is certainly ripe for a comprehensive review and suitable revisions.

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<sup>20</sup> The reference is to a speech delivered by the former national security advisor Shivshankar Menon at the National Defence College in 2010, in which he described India’s nuclear doctrine as emphasising on “no first use and non use against non-nuclear weapon states”. Some experts misread it as implying that India will have no first use against non-nuclear weapon states, which they felt was a significant doctrinal re-interpretation; whereas Menon was actually listing the tenets of the doctrine in a linear fashion by first mentioning ‘no first use’ and then ‘non use against non-nuclear weapon states’. While the confusion could be attributed to the misquoting of his words, the text of the speech was subsequently published by the Ministry of External Affairs. See [“Speech by NSA Shri Shivshankar Menon at NDC on “The Role of Force in Strategic Affairs,” Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, October 21, 2010.](#)

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