

Should India amend its nuclear doctrine?



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Against the backdrop of a muscular posturing of Modi's foreign policy towards Pakistan, there have been clamours from various quarters for India to abandon its [no-first-use nuclear policy](#) and project a more aggressive nuclear stance to match Mr. Modi's vision of foreign policy. Last year, the former Indian Defence Minister, Manohar Parrikar, had caused a flutter when he questioned India's no-first-use nuclear stance.

Mr. Parrikar had argued that abandoning the no first use clause of the doctrine will add to the strength and deterrent effect of our nuclear weapon programme ([The Indian Express: 2016](#)). A declared policy that forecloses the possibility of a first-strike shrinks the menu of nuclear options available to New Delhi and diminishes India's nuclear strength, he maintained.

His view garnered support from various quarters especially in view that Pakistan has retained its first-strike capability ever since it went nuclear in 1998 and has continually hinted implicit nuclear threats to arm-twist India.

The fact that Pakistan deployed its nuclear weapons for 'tactical' use after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008, as a part of its overt policy to ensure "full spectrum of nuclear deterrence" has further antagonised opinions in New Delhi. Former National Security Adviser, Mr Shivshankar Menon, explains in his new book [Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy](#) "What this means is that Pakistan will build many more nuclear warheads and that the use of these so-called tactical weapons will be deployed to lower-ranking officers at the battlefield level. Once that happens, command and control of these lethal weapons will be much looser." (Menon: 2016, p. 173)

India's suspicions and apprehensions gain further credence from the fact that Pakistan is the only nuclear weapon state in the world whose nuclear weapon programme is not under the civilian government's control but under the control of its army [which is increasingly radicalised](#). Shivshankar Menon has described the Pakistani army as 'religiously motivated', 'less professional' and 'which has produced rogue officers and staged coups against its own leaders' (Menon 2016, pp. 173). Given such situation, clearly, India's security concerns are intense.

Pakistan is one of the biggest external nuclear threats to India. However, India's nuclear fears are not limited to just Pakistan. [Apprehensions about Beijing and growing nuclear presence in the Indian Ocean are also causes of worry](#). It must be remembered that [China went critical in 1964](#), when the wounds of Sino-Indian war were still raw and India clearly felt threatened, though China pledged no first use.

Thus, India faces genuine security concerns, especially from Islamabad. However, the moot question is: does such a regional scenario compel India to amend its nuclear doctrine? Should India follow the suit of the US and Pakistan, and adopt a first-use policy? Would such a policy help ward off Indian security concerns?

Foreign policy or the nuclear policy of any nation is not a static document and must evolve according to the changing times and geopolitical dynamics. However, at the present juncture there are several reasons to believe that it shall not be prudent for India to abandon the no-first-use nuclear doctrine.

Firstly, the credibility of India's nuclear deterrence programme will not be augmented but diminished if the no first use clause is removed. No first use clause brings great clarity into India's nuclear policy as it defines the threshold mark which if breached would warrant massive nuclear retaliation. This clarity of nuclear threshold is essential to deter the possible aggressors. Abandoning the no first use clause would mean abandoning this clarity of the nuclear policy and thus compromising the aim of achieving "credible minimum deterrence".

"The clearer and simpler the task of our nuclear weapons, the more credible they are. And the more credible they are, the stronger will be their deterrent effect" says, Shivshankar Menon on the subject. (Menon 2016)

Further, the declared no first use policy almost rules out the possibility of pre-emptive nuclear strikes. If there is no such declared no-first-use policy then, under certain situations the likely aggressor may even feel incentivised to launch pre-emptive strikes and take early advantage in a possible nuclear exchange.

From a larger South Asian perspective, abandoning the no first use doctrine will greatly destabilise the subcontinent because it would create a situation where two acrimonious neighbours with a history riddled with skirmishes and wars will both possess first strike capability. Mutual suspicions will increase and antagonisms would be magnified. The restraint on the nuclear trigger will become looser and the subcontinent, overall, will be brought closer to a nuclear war. Even a knee-jerk, emotive response to an event may instigate a full-blown nuclear war.

Even further, no-first-use nuclear policy implicitly imposes an upper limit to the nuclear stockpile. The nuclear stockpile remains restricted to a level at which it is able to ensure credible minimum deterrence. If nuclear policy allows first-strike capability and the use of nuclear warheads as war-fighting weapons, then it incentivises the nation to escalate its nuclear weapon production. The greater the number of nuclear arsenals in such a nation's quiver, the greater its military clout. This may potentially set off an arms race in the region, destabilising it in the long run.



*Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) Units 1 and 2 in Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu.
Image credit: [Reetesh Chaurasia](#) CC BY-SA 4.0.*

The world sees India as a responsible and mature nuclear power which exercises self-restraint despite [being a non-signatory to non-proliferation regimes like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty \(NPT\) and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty \(CTBT\)](#). On this basis, India makes its [claims to the membership of international platforms like Nuclear Suppliers Group \(NSG\)](#) or permanent membership of UN Security Council (UNSC) without being compelled to sign the NPT. Doing away with the no-first-use clause of its nuclear policy will compromise India's position in all such issues and jeopardise its civilian nuclear partnerships with countries like Japan and the US.

India cannot follow the suit of countries like Pakistan which have traditionally been aggressors. Since the beginning of India's independent foreign policy during the Nehruvian period, India has maintained a moral high ground in its international relations. India's foreign policy has been driven by ethics and morality as much as it has been driven by realism and pragmatism. That is why [India is the only nuclear weapon state in the world that has been a full-throated supporter of complete nuclear disarmament](#). Thus, among other things, there is also a moral compulsion towards India's ideals of peaceful co-existence and *Panchasheel* to not abandon the no-first-use policy.

The Indian government has repeatedly reviewed its no first use nuclear policy since India attained criticality in 1998. Each time the government has upheld it. The doctrine has been quite successful in achieving its objective of credible minimum deterrence. Threats and attacks by aggressor states like Pakistan have significantly diminished. In fact, it may be observed that no full-fledged war has happened since Pokhran-I, 1974 while three full-fledged wars were fought between the two countries within twenty-five years of independence – 1947, 1965 and 1971. Kargil was an attempt by Pakistan to test the new threshold mark after India went nuclear in 1998.

There is no gainsaying the fact that India must keep reviewing its nuclear policy and keep adapting it to the dynamism of international politics. However, in view of the seven reasons discussed above, it can be concluded that the present world order and the regional situation does not require us to amend our no first use nuclear doctrine. Abandoning the no first use clause cause greater harm than good under the present set of circumstances.

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