

Briefing Memo

Discussion on the Reconsideration of “No First Use” in India’s Nuclear Doctrine

Masahiro KURITA
Research Fellow, Asia and Africa Division,
Regional Studies Department

1. Introduction

In recent times, there has been an upsurge in discussions on the possibility of a review of India’s nuclear doctrine. This was triggered by Associate Professor Vipin Narang of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an expert in nuclear policies of emerging nuclear powers, who pointed out, at an international conference on nuclear issues organized by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (United States) in March 2017, that India is showing signs of shifting away from its “No First Use” (NFU) of nuclear weapons, which it has long held as a pillar of its nuclear doctrine.

As a responsible nuclear power, India has traditionally adopted a relatively “moderate” nuclear posture with minimum retaliatory capability configured solely for deterring nuclear attacks and blackmails from adversaries. However, with regard to the contents of the nuclear doctrine that sets out this “moderate” nuclear posture, the need to review the doctrine has been raised frequently by the domestic strategic community. Given that the NFU, as one of the pillars of this doctrine, has often become the focus of such debates, Narang’s assertion, at one glance, appears to merely reflect and capture the latest part of such trends.

However, he is not only asserting that India is moving away from the NFU, but also suggesting the possibility of a shift toward a more offensive direction: the option of nuclear counterforce first strike designed to fully disarm Pakistan’s nuclear capability. This argument, along with the fact that he based this inference not on some hawkish voices in India, but on calls from more mainstream former high-ranking officials in the country, drew much attention.

This paper reviews the latest discussion on the possibility of a reconsideration of NFU in India’s nuclear doctrine, and offers an overview of the trends in India’s nuclear policy. Based on these, it then analyzes whether India is actually moving gradually toward the abolition of NFU and the adoption of the first strike option as of now, and considers the impact that discussions concerning the reconsideration of the nuclear doctrine in India has on deterrence stability between India and Pakistan.

2. Official Nuclear Doctrine

The NFU, strictly speaking, is a principle of nuclear operation, which states that nuclear weapons shall not be used unless the country comes under a nuclear attack. In the case of India, after nuclear tests were conducted in May 1998, then-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee declared the adoption of the NFU principle in August the same year.

However, this NFU underwent a certain degree of revisions thereafter. In August 1999, the National

Security Advisory Board (NSAB), which is a governmental advisory committee, released the Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) as an unofficial document. This draft doctrine positioned the objective of possessing nuclear weapons as deterrence against the use of nuclear weapons against India and its forces, and the threat thereof. It also affirmed the NFU in the following statement: “India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail.” However, when the official nuclear doctrine was released in January 2003, certain qualifications were attached to this NFU. In short, while it stated that nuclear weapons are used only as a means of retaliation against nuclear attacks on Indian territory and its forces anywhere, India reserves the option of using its nuclear capabilities in a counterattack should it be subjected to a large-scale attack that involves the use of biological and chemical weapons. Thereafter, the NFU qualified by this condition has been positioned as India’s NFU.

The official nuclear doctrine released in 2003 has been maintained till the present day without any revisions, at least in public, and the fact that this NFU remains in force has been touched on and affirmed from time to time. For example, the Indian Maritime Doctrine released in 2009 states that India is a nuclear power that has adopted the NFU, and the revised edition in 2015 states the same. Furthermore, in April 2013, Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary as well as Chairman of the NSAB at the time, remarked that the government has adhered to the NFU, and built up nuclear capabilities and infrastructure that is suitable for the use of nuclear weapons in retaliatory attacks. In the general election held in 2014, the current ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) included the reconsideration of the nuclear doctrine in its manifesto, which was reportedly focused on reviewing the NFU. However, Narendra Modi, who was then a candidate for the Prime Minister’s seat, negated the revision, asserting that the NFU is a reflection of India’s cultural heritage.

3. Past Debates over the Reconsideration of the NFU

Among experts in the field of India’s nuclear policy both within and outside of India, the general perception is that the understanding of the nature of nuclear weapons widely shared in India, particularly among the political leadership that holds the final authority on nuclear decision-making, is in no small way related to the relatively moderate nuclear posture that India has adopted till now, including the NFU. This shared understanding, in short, is that nuclear weapons are political weapons, rather than a military means used to fight a war like conventional weapons are; hence, nuclear weapons are only effective in the deterrence of nuclear attacks by other countries, and the threat thereof.

At the same time, from a more concrete policy and strategic perspective, there has been an awareness of the rationality of the NFU to India. While India is a nuclear power that is not party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), it has aimed to gain acceptance into the international nuclear order with the NPT as its core. In this respect, projecting a “moderate” nuclear posture, including its adherence to the NFU, holds significance for India. Moreover, against both China and Pakistan, India is not in a situation where it must rely on the threat of nuclear first use in order to offset its conventional inferiority; neither is it in a position where it feels a strong incentive to resort to nuclear first use due to concerns that its retaliatory capabilities would be seriously degraded by other countries’ first use. Of course, China is significantly superior to India in both the respects of nuclear and conventional military capabilities; however, since India’s nuclearization, competition between the two countries has never taken on a military aspect that presented such imminent danger.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that there have been rising calls within India for revisions or revocation

of the NFU. For example, already in 2002, NSAB recommended the government to abolish the NFU, citing as its reason dissatisfaction over the non-adoption of NFU by other nuclear powers. Debates that take this tone of “Why should India be the only country exercising restraint?” are deeply rooted. When China omitted all mention of NFU from its defense white paper in 2013, leading to growing doubts about whether China has changed its stance on NFU that it had adhered to until then, there were rising calls for the NFU revision within the India’s strategic community.

Criticism of the NFU from strategic perspectives has also constantly been brought up within the strategic community. An example of such assertions is that while the premise of NFU is to absorb the first use from the adversary, this involves forcing upon the citizens a sacrifice that cannot be justified in any way, and at the same time, gives the adversary the opportunity to seriously degrade India’s retaliatory capabilities. To prevent that from happening, the country then has no choice but to equip itself with expensive assets such as large-scale nuclear forces and wide-area ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems. These are not compatible with the principle of “minimum deterrence.”

4. Recent Debates over the Reconsideration of NFU

Looking at these past debate trends, the most recent debate over the reconsideration of the NFU in India, which Narang based his assertions on, is not necessarily a new debate that has emerged without any context.

However, one point that should be added is, debates concerning the review of India’s nuclear doctrine, including the NFU, in the 2010s have been inspired, to a considerable extent, by Pakistan’s introduction of tactical nuclear weapons. In India, since Pakistan’s nuclearization, there has been an established perception that Pakistan is using its nuclear deterrent capability as a shield to deter India from using its superior conventional force, while at the same time supporting terrorism and insurgency in India. To counter this, India has pursued the option of limited conventional war which enables the country to punish Pakistan without crossing its nuclear threshold. However, this resulted in Pakistan’s introduction of tactical nuclear weapons, which can be used as a limited nuclear option against India’s limited conventional operation without inviting India’s massive nuclear retaliation. Consequently, the question of how to address the problem of Pakistan’s tactical nuclear weapons spurred India’s strategic community into debates about the validity of its current nuclear doctrine.

Narang’s assertions were also made in the context of this debate. According to Narang, the most likely trigger of nuclear use between India and Pakistan had traditionally been considered to be the occurrence of a serious terrorist attack by an organization deemed to be supported by Pakistan. Under such circumstances, if India resorts to conventional retaliation, Pakistan would not be able to defend itself with its own conventional capability, and would ultimately cross the “nuclear threshold” by using tactical nuclear weapons. However, Narang states that, recently, there are growing signs that India would go first, against the NFU instead. Furthermore, this first use of nuclear weapons would not be a countervalue strike against Pakistan’s population and industrial centers, which had previously and traditionally been considered to be the mode of its nuclear counterattacks; instead, it would be a large-scale and comprehensive counterforce first strike with the intention of completely neutralizing Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities in order to limit the damage incurred by India in a nuclear war.

To support his assertion that the Indian government is gradually moving toward the adoption of such an option, Narang touches on the fact that the voices calling for the introduction of such first strike options are not restricted to hawkish strategists or retired veterans who have traditionally been

dissatisfied with the government's restrained posture, but extend to former high-ranking officials who have greater influence on policies and are familiar with the nuclear issue. In particular, he offers, as important evidence, the point that Shivshankar Menon, who served as the National Security Adviser (NSA) from 2010 to 2014, mentioned the option of a large-scale counterforce first strike on Pakistan in his work published in 2016.

As explained earlier, Narang's assertion has attracted an unusual degree of attention for the presentation of a problem by a researcher, and at the same time, stirred controversy. While there are those who agree, others have refuted that India has shown no visible signs of revising or revoking the NFU. For instance, Rajesh Rajagopalan from Jawaharlal Nehru University states that India's current nuclear capabilities, including its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, have not reached the level enough to carry out such a large-scale counterforce first strike; in addition, the recognition of a problem related to the nuclear force balance with Pakistan—which should inevitably become a point of contention in considering such an option—has not yet arisen. With these points in mind, he claims, with the exception of such talk by former high-ranking officials, there are hardly any signs that indicate changes to India's nuclear doctrine. Narang's heavy reliance on Menon's work has also been viewed as a problem because Menon is, after all, a former NSA under the Congress government, and has no involvement whatsoever with the current BJP administration. In view of this, the rebuttal is that it is impossible to see, based on Menon's views, which direction the current administration plans to take the nuclear doctrine toward.

5. Future Outlook and Impact on Nuclear Deterrence between India and Pakistan

As we have seen, amidst the resurgence of discussions on whether or not India is gradually changing its stance on the NFU, the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces was released in April 2017. The document affirmed the maintenance of the NFU principle. If we were to take this at face value, it would signal that there is no departure from the NFU nor shift toward the first strike option.

Hypothetically, if India were to move away from the NFU and adopt the large-scale counterforce first strike option against Pakistan, the realization of this shift is probably still some distance into the future. At present, there is consensus among experts that India's capability is still far from making that a reality, and this fact is acknowledged even among those who, like Narang, assert that the NFU will be revised. It is difficult to imagine that India would make such a decision at a point where the decision cannot be supported in any way by actual capability. Of course, theoretically, making the decision to adopt such an option in the doctrine, followed by the development of capabilities to that end, is also conceivable. However, India's current efforts that could possibly contribute to the realization of such a goal, like the development of multiple independently-targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs), highly accurate missiles, and missile defense systems, are initiatives that it had undertaken long before the debate on the first strike option surfaced, and the view of external expert on them is that these weapon programs have been driven by organizational interests of the scientific community and the momentum of technological development, rather than doctrinal necessities. If that were indeed the case, even if the introduction of a first strike option were probable, it would be more natural for India to do so only after these programs have produced certain results and its capability buildup has reached a certain level.

Nevertheless, taking into account the presence of such weapons development and Pakistan's long-held suspicions on the credibility of India's NFU, there is room for India to complicate Pakistan's calculations through showing signs of its shift toward the large-scale first strike option. Already, several

commentators have presented the view that India is now attempting to apply “psychological warfare” through the use of such ambiguity. In addition, based on Menon’s explanation, even if such an option were to be adopted, it is not certain if this would be apparent to external parties. According to Menon, a first strike in the face of an imminent nuclear attack by an adversary falls under a “gray area” of India’s current NFU, and the existing nuclear doctrine does not state whether such an attack would be allowed or not. In other words, this means that even if no changes were made to the NFU in terms of the wording used in the doctrine, we cannot eliminate the possibility that India is adopting the first strike option. This is considered to further complicate Pakistan’s calculations.

The problem is that, regardless of the truth of whether or not India plans to change its policy, there is a strong possibility that Pakistan would act based on the premise that India is introducing such an option. For example, Rajagopalan points out that while India and Pakistan have maintained a relatively low level of nuclear readiness till now, and have stored nuclear warheads separately from their delivery vehicles in peacetime, if Pakistan were to perceive a serious threat of a large-scale counterforce first strike by India, it would raise its alert level. Ultimately, this would increase the risk of “inadvertent” nuclear use. In light of the presence of such a risk, even if India’s nuclear doctrine does not move away from the NFU in the near future, the international community would still be called upon to pay close attention to such a debate and actual policy developments in both India and Pakistan.

Reference

- Alica Sanders-Zakre and Kelsey Davenport, “Is India Shifting Nuclear Doctrine?” *Arms Control Today*, May 2017.
- Gurmeet Kanwal, “India’s Nuclear Doctrine: Need for a Review,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 5, 2014, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/india%E2%80%99s-nuclear-doctrine-need-review>.
- Michael Krepon, Travis Wheeler and Shane Mason, eds., *The Lure & Pitfalls of MIRVs: From the First to the Second Nuclear Age*, Stimson Center, May 2016, http://www.stimson.org/sites/default/files/file-attachments/Lure_and_Pitfalls_of_MIRVs.pdf.
- “NUKEFEST2017 Hot Takes: Potential Indian Nuclear First Use?” South Asian Voices, March 21, 2017, <https://southasianvoices.org/sav-dc-nukefest2017-potential-indian-nuclear-first-use/>.
- Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India’s Foreign Policy*, Brookings Institution Press, 2016.
- Verghese Koithara, *Managing India’s Nuclear Forces*, Brookings Institution Press, 2012.

(Completed on July 18, 2017)

The views expressed in this column are solely those of authors and do not represent the official views of NIDS.

We do not permit any unauthorized reproduction or unauthorized copying of the article.

Please contact us at the following regarding any questions, comments or requests you may have.

Planning and Management Division, Planning and Administration Department, NIDS

Telephone: 03-3260-3011 ext.: 8-6-29171

FAX: 03-3260-3034 *NIDS Website: <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/>