CHAPTER : III
NUCLEAR POLICY- MINIMUM CREDIBLE
NUCLEAR DETERRENCE AS THE STRATEGIC
OPTION FOR INDIA
Chapter-III

INDIA'S NUCLEAR POLICY-MINIMUM CREDIBLE NUCLEAR DETERRENCE
AS THE STRATEGIC OPTION FOR INDIA

India broke the international taboo by going nuclear in May 1998 by testing a series of nuclear explosive devices in a couple of days and officially declaring itself a nuclear weapon power. In a suo moto statement issued on May 27, 1998 the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said in parliament: "India is a nuclear weapon state... This is a reality that can not be denied... it is not a conferment we seek, nor is a status for others to grant." ¹

The profound international outrage over India's action and the accusation that India had no credible nuclear security threat is not justified. They also objected to the sudden change in stand from disarmament and complete elimination of nuclear weapons to overt nuclearisation flouting the prevailing tide of nuclear arms reduction and non-proliferation. All such accusations flow from a flawed assessment of India's nuclear policy and the inability to internalise and comprehend India's threat perceptions.

A series of events and factors contributed to the ending of self imposed restraint, which was absolutely in consonance with its policy of independence and self-reliance, which it has been following since the days of independence. We have already discussed the events that led to the change in perception in India's nuclear policy. They can be briefly summarized under the following heads:

1. **Pakistan as a National security Threat**

   Three wars already fought and the ongoing cross border terrorism along with building up of a nuclear weapons programme solely directed against India. It was amassing weapons of mass destruction by importing missiles from China and North Korea and violating MTCR to which the watchdogs of international ethics chose to turn a blind eye.

2. **The China Factor**

   China had been a potential security threat since its aggression against India in October 1962. This threat perception has sharpened because of its growing assertion of power in South and South East Asia. The Sino Pakistani collusion in the latter's development of nuclear weapons and missile production, and their general security and diplomatic cooperation has been largely directed against India. The ongoing border dispute has only compounded this threat perception.

3. **Shift in emphasis from disarmament to nuclear non proliferation:**

   India was increasingly pressurized to forego its nuclear option and accede to the discriminatory NPT and CTBT which placed different set of obligation and responsibilities on the nuclear haves and nuclear have nots. The CTBT's "entry into force" clause only tightened the stranglehold against India out of which it broke free by testing nuclear weapons before the CTBT deadline of September 1999 had arrived.

---

2. P. M. Kamath, 'US-China Relations under the Clinton administration; comprehensive engagement or the Cold War Again?' Strategic Analysis Vol. 22, No 5, August 1998, pp 699-704.
In a Brief on India's Nuclear Tests published by the Ministry of External Affairs (Disarmament and International Security Affairs Division) titled “Global Disarmament and Legitimate Security for all” the imperatives of India's Security Environment has been discussed. The criticism that there was no evidence of the sudden emergence of a substantial new threat in our neighborhood was not well founded. According to it, the threat did not appear overnight but was the result of evolution over the years as discussed above. In the above paper the rudiments of India's nuclear doctrine were laid down.

4. **Post cold war international order**

The post cold war strategic environment disturbed the earlier balance. Efforts by US to impose unipolarity had increased apprehensions about the international order managed more by denial regimes and punitive actions rather than democratic values pushed India to the precipice. Failure of UN to provide cover against nuclear aggression because Veto power, belongs only to the NWS, who would have used them as they would have been the aggressor themselves was another factor.

5. The immediate inducement to go nuclear was provided by the testing of Ghauri a medium range missile by Pakistan in April 1998, which could reach any Indian city with conventional or nuclear war heads.

All the above factors amply justify India's action. As Prime Minister Vajpayee has said, "A country of 100 crores cannot be left to the mercy of others......... Nuclear weaponisation is in self-defence. Our enemies should know that we have nuclear
weapons so that they will not attack us." 3 India’s declaration of itself as a nuclear weapon state was seen by the Western Powers as an effort on its part to emerge as a major power. China too has been vociferous in advising India to forget about its pursuit of great power status, but it has to be remembered that it was not the craving for major power status that induced India to go nuclear. Though the major power status may be a concomitant of the nuclear power status but it certainly is not the sole criteria to go nuclear. The decision was the resultant of the threat perception of the state in an increasingly nuclearised and hostile environment.

The only accusation that can be labelled against the Indian policy makers is that India had as such no declared nuclear policy and hence caught the world unawares. After India exploded nuclear weapons in May 1998, there were eight rounds of talks between US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott and the then Indian Minister of External Affairs, Jaswant Singh. One point repeatedly stressed by Talbott was the need for India to define its **doctrine of minimal nuclear deterrence**.4

Some western scholars like George Tanham of the Rand Corporation have also held the view that India lacks a strategic policy. Indian defence analysts have for long lamented the lack of a national security vision and strategy. With his characteristic frankness K. Subramanyam minces no words in bluntly stating that,

"It is well recognized all over the world that India does not have a tradition of strategic thinking......mainly due to the incapacity of our political leaders and top civil servants to take a long term view of national security. This is compounded by their consequent failure in giving a lead to the armed forces in preparing the country to face its long

term need for defence preparedness.”

In this background, the need was felt to clearly define the Indian nuclear doctrine. The newly constituted National Security Advisory Board drafted the Indian Nuclear Doctrine. The draft was released by the National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra on August 17, 1999 for the purpose of public debate. The main tenets of the minimum nuclear doctrine have been discussed below:-

1. India shall pursue a doctrine of credible minimum deterrence. In this policy of “retaliation only” the survivability of our nuclear arsenal is critical. This is a dynamic concept related to the strategic environment, technological imperatives and the needs of national security.

   The actual size, components, deployment and employment of nuclear forces will be decided in the light of these factors. India's peacetime posture aims at convincing any potential aggressor that:

   (a) any threat of use of nuclear weapons against India shall invoke measures to counter the threat; and

   (b) any nuclear attack on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor.

2. The fundamental purpose of Indian nuclear weapons is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons by any state or entity against India and its forces. India will not be first to initiate a nuclear strike but will respond with pre-emptive retaliation should deterrence fail.

3. India will not resort to the use of or threat of use of nuclear weapons against states, which do not possess nuclear weapons or are not aligned with nuclear weapon powers.

4. Deterrence requires that India maintain:

(a) Sufficient, survivable and operationally prepared nuclear forces,

(b) A robust command, control system,

(c) Effective intelligence and early warning capabilities, and

(d) Comprehensive planning and training for operation in line with the strategy, and

(e) The will to employ nuclear forces and weapons.

5. Highly effective conventional military capabilities shall be maintained to raise the threshold of outbreak both of conventional military conflict as well as of threat or use of nuclear weapons.

6. It recommends that India's nuclear forces be based on a triad of strategic bombers, land based missiles and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMS)

7. The doctrine also assures civilian control of nuclear weapons by a democratically elected leadership through a system of command control.

8. While India is committed to maintain the deployment of a deterrent, which is both minimum and credible, it will not accept any restraints on building its R&D capability.

9. The real distinguishing feature of India's nuclear doctrine is that it is anchored on India's continued commitment to global, verifiable and non discriminating nuclear disarmament. It is firmly committed to "No first Use" of nuclear weapons.
The doctrine points out India's desire to see the world completely rid of nuclear weapons.

The draft doctrine initiated a major debate in the country about its nuclear policies. Amitabh Mattoo called it, "an unapologetic real politic articulation of the principal raison d'Être of India's nuclear weapons and the requirements needed to lend credibility to the country's deterrent posture." While agreeing with the thrust of India's nuclear policy he wrote that India's primary quest appeared to be to acquire the strategic autonomy necessary for making independent decisions in an often unfriendly world and to pursue economic and political development without fear of external threats.6 R.Prasanna called the draft doctrine a wish list attached to the collective speeches of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues. Bharat Wariarwalla criticized the draft doctrine on the grounds that

the definition of minimum deterrence would be very different vis-à-vis China and Pakistan and hence, the term was too loose to pass off as a doctrine.

In a paper written by Jasjit Singh titled, "Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine: Some Reflections", he has tried to refute the criticisms labeled by the critics.7 According to him first, it is not a doctrine accepted or endorsed by the government as yet. It is, as the document says a draft proposal of the NSAB. Secondly, many comments in India and abroad have confused the very concept of a "doctrine" in spite of a clear statement in the preamble of the paper where in Para 1.6 the document states that "this document outlines the broad principles for the development, deployment employment of India's

nuclear forces." A doctrine is expected to define broad principles and concepts for guidance of policy makers after it has been approved by duly constituted authorities. It must not be confused with policy strategy or even posture which no doubt may be expected to flow from it. This elementary fact seems to have been missed by most critics. He further adds "that many people complain that the doctrine does not indicate the "cost" of India's proposed nuclear force? The issue of cost is very important. But should a doctrine go into costs? If it does, would it remain a document that outlines "broad principles"? On the other hand the document consistently states that Indian would pursue a doctrine of credible "minimum" deterrence. The concept of minimum is not merely related to a singly aspect of say, numbers, but also costs and posture."

He further questions another criticism that is raised about the doctrine that the doctrine does not adopt the conventional wisdom of other nuclear weapon states. In response to this allegation he says that this is not only in contrast to the acknowledged wisdom of the main nuclear powers but seeks to chart a new path.

According to him the central foundation of the doctrine is built on four principles.

1. India's nuclear weapons are meant to deter nuclear weapons threat/use. Unlike most other nuclear weapon states, India's nuclear weapons are not meant to deter the use and threat of use of conventional weapons, chemical weapons, biological weapons, or a generalized formulation of protecting national interests any time any where. The doctrine requires that the nuclear policy should seek to deter rather than fight a war with nuclear weapons. The orientation of the doctrine is thus completely defensive in philosophy. Jasjit Singh further emphasizes the "minimum" level of deterrence which has been wrongly
interpreted as "massive retaliation by some critics like Raja Menon who writes that, there is a serious dysfunction between minimum deterrence and tri service arsenal." 8

2. The second important principle according to Jasjit Singh is the principle of: No First Use" even against a nuclear threat or use. It commits Indian nuclear policy to one of retaliation only. A retaliation only doctrine accepts the fact that India will not initiate a nuclear strike under any circumstances. On the other hand, in order to reduce the risk of an attack on India it promises in unequivocal terms that sure and certain retaliation will follow.

3. As a defensive doctrine of no first use and limiting the use of nuclear weapons to retaliation only, India's draft doctrine is in total harmony with the UN charter. Art 51 of the charter under chapter VII clearly endorses "The inherent right of individual or collective self defence if an armed attack occurs against a member of the United Nations."

4. The doctrine emphasizes that global verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament is a national security objective. In fact the doctrine clearly states that the absence of nuclear disarmament has created the need for India to acquire its nuclear deterrent.

   Apprehensions have been expressed that this doctrine would set off a nuclear arms race. Jasjit Singh offers the following explanation "The concerns about a potential arms race reflect a perception arising out of the prism of cold war mindsets where first strike (and even "launch on warning") was the order of

8. ibid.
the day. This necessitated large arsenals and potentially preemptive strikes with nuclear weapons. The result was the peak of 67,000 nuclear warheads. But China did not follow the same route and relied on minimum deterrence concept with a no first use commitment.

There is no evidence that China's nuclear posture led to any arms race. Even in future China's nuclear arsenal is likely to be dictated by the size of US/Russian arsenals and issues like ballistic missile defences etc. rather than the defensive doctrine of India. 9

**Efficacy of no first use**

It is an accepted fact that nuclear weapons because of their enormous destructive potential are used more as political weapons rather than as military weapons. Those who saw nuclear weapons as serving a military purpose in real combat naturally opted for first use and preemptive nuclear strategies and developed complex war fighting doctrines while the others saw no real purpose except that of deterrence and adopted deterrence strategies, including no first use.

India's declaration of its no first use doctrine has once again focused international debate on the efficacy of no first use policies even though India has repeatedly offered to negotiate no first use treaties bilaterally or multilaterally with all nuclear weapon states including China and Pakistan.

---

A no first use commitment is not merely a verbal or a negotiated assurance it can and must be seen to be reflected in the nuclear force structure, the deployment patterns, the types of surveillance assets in place and the state of readiness of a country's nuclear forces. China, which had announced its no first use commitment after its nuclear test in 1964, has diluted its policy by emphasizing that such declaration does not apply to territories that belong to China. While Taiwan falls in this category so does Arunachal Pradesh in India which China claims as its own territory.

So it is plausible that China could contemplate the use of nuclear weapons during a war over Taiwan or a border conflict with India in Arunachal Pradesh.

Many analysts in India have averred that India has gained nothing and has unnecessarily elected to bear the horrendous costs of a nuclear strike by choosing to adopt a purely retaliatory policy. Rear Admiral Raja Menon asks: "will India... be committed to absorbing a nuclear strike in case deterrence fails."? And answers: "Hardly, because in the event that an intelligence warning of a 'definite' nuclear strike is received the NCP (National Command Post) will have to consider among other options, a first launch." 10 To advocate no first use and then consider first use as soon as the alarm bells are sounded would be duplicitous and unworthy of India's democratic traditions. So, is India's no first use doctrine merely rhetorical nonsense or is it based on sound operational reasoning? These issues pose a strategic dilemma which can be tested only in the crucible of operational reality.