

**Full length Research Paper**

# India's Nuclear Doctrine of Credible Minimum Deterrence

**Uday Pratap Singh**

Research Fellow, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad, Allahabad (U.P.), India.



**Article history**

Received: 18-06-2017

Revised: 28-06-2017

Accepted: 01-07-2017

**Corresponding Author:**

**Uday Pratap Singh**

Research Fellow,  
 Department of Defence &  
 Strategic studies,  
 University of Allahabad,  
 Allahabad (U.P.), India.

**Abstract**

India's nuclear doctrine states that a credible nuclear deterrence must be maintained but the means to achieve it have not been specified. If the nuclear deterrence fail then what would be the number and type of nuclear weapons India would require for a punitive second strike. Even if the framework of a nuclear force structure is arrived at then what would be the delivery systems that would be required to maintain the minimum credible deterrence? To maintain an effective credible nuclear deterrence as per our stated nuclear doctrine, India needs to maintain a specified number of nuclear weapons and build a reliable and effective triad for the deterrence to be credible. The concept of 'credible minimum deterrence' as stated in India's nuclear doctrine is ambiguous and it's meaning and exact definition has not been stated. Even if the numbers are ascertained the quantum of delivery platforms or a triad has not been clearly spelt. The author examines nuclear force structure in a dynamic security environment with emphasis on Pakistan and china and analyzing the requirement of a triad for maintain a credible minimum deterrence and identification of challenges for India in its quest for a formidable triad.

**Key words:** deterrence, massive retaliation, assumed destruction, pokhran ii, no first use, tactical nuclear weapon, first strike, nuclear brinkmanship.

**Introduction**

What is the theory of deterrence<sup>1</sup> and how did it come to play the predominant role that it does in strategic affairs and international politics? One must begin with the observation that this Western ideological-political construction did not have the importance that it does today until several years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While the United States retained overwhelming superiority in nuclear arms and the means to deliver them, there was no need to talk of deterrence. The stated goal of American nuclear forces was massive retaliation in response to any attack from the Soviet Union. In later versions of the U.S. nuclear doctrine, it was 'assured destruction'. Deterrence theory came into its own only when it became clear that the Soviet Union in any realistic assessment had caught up with the U.S. and that 'assured destruction' had turned into 'mutual assured destruction'<sup>2</sup>.

The central thesis of the theory of deterrence is that it is the possession of nuclear weapons that ensures that nuclear war will never take place. Both sides should possess a retaliatory strike capability that is invulnerable, that will not be annihilated under any circumstances by a first-strike. "Perceptions" and "Psychology" play an important role in convincing the adversary that any aggression by him will only lead to his annihilation. The theory of deterrence is not concerned with the threat of nuclear annihilation; living in its shadow is the name of the game. In the perverse logic of deterrence, tethered on the brink of the nuclear abyss is the only way of ensuring peace and stability.

But there is more to deterrence than brinkmanship. The awful, essential, truth of deterrence theory is that the possessor stands committed to using, and threatening to use, nuclear weapons. If it is admitted in advance that nuclear - weapons will not be used in a crisis then the benefits of deterrence cannot be enjoyed prior to its breakdown.

Did deterrence ever really work? In the first instance, the strategists of nuclear war themselves were the first to shift gradually away from deterrence.<sup>3</sup> Once the Soviet Union gained parity with the U.S., fears began to be expressed that this would enable the Soviets to attack Europe without fear of retaliation. The result was that eventually the 'breakdown of deterrence' became the central concern of strategists and not the question of how to make deterrence work. In the heyday of Reaganism and Star Wars, the emphasis shifted for a while to 'winning' or 'prevailing' in a nuclear war. Peace has been preserved because an overwhelming caution has surrounded nuclear weapons for obvious reasons. It is only the grave uncertainties that face the state that chooses to use nuclear weapons first that have held the world back from nuclear war.

Nor has the possession of nuclear weapons proved to be of much avail in conventional conflicts. The experience of the United States in Indochina and that of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan are among the notable examples. Nor could the menacing entry of a U.S. aircraft carrier into the Bay of Bengal during the Bangladesh conflict influence the course of events in any serious way. Despite this example being cited frequently in support of the Indian case for nuclear weaponisation, it is clear that the

overwhelming support that the Indian policy had, both in India and abroad, proved more than a match for any implied nuclear threat.

It is this discredited theory of deterrence, an immoral and dangerous justification for the possession of weapons of mass annihilation and genocide that the Indian Government and assorted nuclear hawks have embraced in their pursuit of a "*minimum credible nuclear deterrence*" doctrine for India's nuclear weapons. The current official claim is that even if both India and Pakistan proceed with nuclear weaponisation, deterrence will preserve peace and stability in the subcontinent.

In the context of nuclear weapons, it is an internationally accepted fact that the entire basis for their possession is deterrence. The entire purpose is to deter the enemy and not to fight him. The very existence (of nuclear weapons) is justified on a theoretical base that is gravely limited at best, and outright wrong at worst... it would be imperative to arrive at a thought that it is better for India to settle the doctrinal issues before going nuclear, or instead of first going nuclear and then looking for doctrinal justification. However, India's nuclear policy evolved without major debate on the doctrinal issues and the nuclear weapons research and development Programme was shrouded in secrecy. It is only after the Pokhran-II nuclear tests that Indian analysts have begun to wrestle with the complexities of nuclear theology and most of the home truths have had to be re-learned. It is a universally accepted truism that deterrence is ultimately a mind game. It needs to be achieved during peace to ensure against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons by one's adversaries and for the purposes of coercive diplomacy.

It was this official fascination with deterrence theory that received political sanction by Indian leadership and was evident from the remarks made by Prime Minister A B Vajpayee in the Lok Sabha on March 15, 1999.<sup>4</sup> Replying to the debate on the motion of thanks to the President, Vajpayee claimed: "*The nuclear weapon is not an offensive weapon. It is a weapon of self-defence. It is the kind of weapon that helps in preserving the peace. If in the days of the Cold War there was no use of force, it was because of the balance of terror.*" This very thought process clearly reflects in the cause for India to possess nuclear weapons and to have a doctrine of No First use and that of credible minimum deterrence.

#### **India's Nuclear Doctrine: An Overview**

In April 1998, the Indian Government had constituted a Task Force to recommend the establishment of a National Security Council. The task force submitted its report in Jun 1998 and in Nov 1998, the government constituted a three tier NSC with a full time NSA and a NSAB. Although the first task that was planned to be originally entrusted to the NSAB was to conduct a strategic defence review, because of the Pokhran II tests the NSAB was tasked to first formulate India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine<sup>5</sup>. The NSAB submitted its Draft Nuclear Doctrine paper to the Government that was released to the public for wider debate in Aug 1999. The key features of the proposed doctrine are reproduced below:

- (a) India shall pursue a doctrine of credible minimum deterrence. In this policy of retaliation only, the survivability of our arsenal is critical. This is a dynamic concept related to our 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:
- (b) Any threat of use of nuclear weapons against India shall invoke measures to counter the threat; and any nuclear attack on India and its forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor.
- (c) 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 and its forces. India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail.
- (d) India will not resort to the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against states that do not possess nuclear weapons, or are not aligned with nuclear weapons powers.

The Draft Nuclear Doctrine, while generally following the policy guidelines enunciated by the Prime Minister gives out the broad frame work for the development, deployment and employment of India's nuclear forces. The draft paper proposes that India should establish a credible, minimum deterrent capability comprising sufficient, survivable and operationally ready nuclear forces based on the principle of no first use of nuclear weapons-It emphasizes that the level of India's nuclear capability should be consistent with maximum credibility, survivability, effectiveness, safety and security. It provides for the establishment of effective intelligence and early warning systems. It recommends that India's nuclear forces be based on a triad of strategic bombers, land based ballistic missiles, and submarine launched ballistic missiles. The draft paper proposes that India's nuclear strike capability be configured to inflict punitive retaliation, the consequences of which would be unacceptable to a potential adversary who will, therefore, be deterred, doing the unthinkable. The doctrine highlights the cardinal supreme of civilian control over India's nuclear weapons and proposes that the final authority for the release of nuclear weapons must vest with the Prime Minister or his designated successor.

The proposed doctrine also rejects the concept of nuclear war fighting and hence, considers it necessary for India to match its nuclear warheads and delivery systems with those of its potential nuclear adversaries. A small number of survivable nuclear warheads and delivery systems that can inflict damage which would be unacceptable to the adversary are considered adequate for the purpose of deterrence. As expected there was a huge debate about the efficacy of nuclear doctrine and policy. Various analysts

criticized the draft nuclear doctrine that opting for a triad of nuclear forces is not indicative of a minimalistic posture but that of a minimalistic one, with particular reference to the sea based weapons. It can be easily argued this criticism fails to take into account the fact that the credibility of a nuclear deterrent that is limited to retaliatory strikes only hinges around the ability of the nuclear force to survive a first strike in sufficient numbers to inflict unacceptable punishment in retaliation.

At this stage apart from ascertaining the necessity of possessing a triad it is also pertinent to understand the two pillars of India's Nuclear Doctrine i.e. Minimum Credible Deterrence and No First Use. Each of them is being discussed in succeeding paragraphs to ascertain their efficacy against our traditional adversaries i.e. Pakistan and China.

### Minimum Credible Deterrence

During the Kennedy era, the Soviet arsenal was estimated to be only one-seventeenth of the US stockpile. Yet, it is well known that during the Cuban missile crisis the US was deterred because the Chiefs of Staff could not assure the government that a few Soviet warheads would not hit American cities even if the US launched a massive disarming first strike. The enduring lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is that even gross asymmetry in the number of nuclear warheads in one's adversary's arsenal provides no guarantee that the adversary would not be deterred if he was convinced that even a few warheads would get through and cause unacceptable damage.

Minimum deterrence<sup>6</sup> is not a numerical definition but a strategic approach. If a country is in a position to have a survivable arsenal, which is capable of exacting an unacceptable penalty in retaliation, it has minimum deterrence as opposed to an open-ended one aimed at matching the adversary's arsenal in numerical terms. Those arsenals in thousands were produced in an era when the strategic establishments believed in nuclear war fighting and did not understand its ecological consequences. Today, sections of the US strategic community argue that the US can discharge its global responsibilities with an arsenal of 200 warheads.

It clearly emerges that the nuclear force levels necessary for a retaliatory strike are independent of the quantum of the adversary's nuclear force and depend only on the numbers that are needed to inflict unacceptable damage. The side that can cause greater damage does not necessarily achieve greater deterrence. Quite obviously, the required number of nuclear warheads and their delivery systems must survive a first strike and there should be adequate redundancy. Hence, for a retaliatory strategy, attempts at maintaining a numerical parity with the adversary are neither necessary nor desirable and, as a corollary, there is no substance in the bogey of a nuclear arms race on the Indian Sub-continent. Kenneth Waltz has written: *"Those who foresee intense arms racing among new nuclear states fail to make the distinction between war fighting and war deterring capabilities. Forces designed for war fighting have to be compared with each other. Forces designed for war deterring need not be compared. The question is not whether one country has less than another, but whether it can do unacceptable damage to another, with unacceptable damage sensibly defined."* However it is evident from India's foreign policy that it has no plans to enter into an arms race with China instead in India's context nuclear deterrence is not a numbers game though a minimum number of nuclear warheads are required to maintain deterrence.

Another aspect which merit attention is the nuclear doctrines of, China and Pakistan. China has a stated policy of no first use<sup>7</sup>, however, it has shifted from minimum nuclear deterrence to a limited nuclear deterrence which includes nuclear coercion. It is estimated today that the Chinese arsenal consists of approximately 300 nuclear weapons. Whatever may be the size of Chinese arsenal it will still be deterred by a credible survivable arsenal of India which will survive after a Chinese counter force first strike, if all it is launched. Similarly, in case of Pakistan which has a stated policy of First Use has a diverse variety of nuclear warheads including Tactical Nuclear Weapons. However, even it will be deterred to launch a first strike fully knowing that the survivable arsenal of India will cause damage unacceptable to it. Hence, it is wise for Indian policy makers to have adopted the policy of credible minimum deterrence.

### Efficacy of No First Use

The concept of no first use logically flows out of the current conventional wisdom that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons. Hence, 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 reiterated that it is willing 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 even a negotiated assurance; it can and must be seen to be reflected in the nuclear force structure, the deployment patterns, the type of surveillance assets in place and the state of readiness of a country's nuclear forces. China announces a NFU commitment immediately after its nuclear test in October 1964. In recent years it has diluted this policy by emphasizing that such a declaration does not apply to territories that belong to China. This clearly points out that China may use nuclear weapons on Taiwan as well as on Arunachal Pradesh which it considers as his own.

Rooted in its strategic culture as it is, India's no first use doctrine is not a hastily formulated policy designed to impress upon the world community to come over the nonproliferation issues. It is a carefully thought out policy that has taken decades to mature, even if it was not publicly well articulated. India's desire to develop a credible minimum deterrent against nuclear blackmail and the threat of use of nuclear weapons is an eminently justifiable national security imperative. India's no first use, retaliation only nuclear doctrine is not only morally befitting and worthy of India's civilization heritage, it is also operationally sound strategy. However, deterrence hinges on credibility and till such time India does not display strong political resolve that it will retaliate

punitively, the deterrence will not be of that value. It will be effective only when our adversaries are convinced that India has both the political as well as military will and wherewithal to respond massively and punitively and will cause unacceptable destruction then only they will be deterred. However, the efficacy of our defensive nuclear policy is fully justified as long as other nuclear weapon states continue to follow the offensive nuclear policies.

### Conclusion

India's nuclear policy of no first use is purely defensive. This policy is not only consistent with its strategic culture but also extremely responsible and mindful and mindful of the horrendous, destruction that nuclear weapons can cause. India also opted to develop only a credible minimum nuclear deterrent due to the widespread recognition that nuclear weapons are political weapons and not weapons for war fighting and their sole purpose is to deter the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. There is a broad national consensus on the development of a credible minimum nuclear deterrent capability and the doctrine of no first use. Minimum deterrence may be defined as a small force of survivable nuclear weapons that would deter an adversary from initiating military action that would threaten a nation's vital interests. India is not looking at establishing any capability beyond this level of deterrence.

The concept of deterrence by denial, rather than deterrence by punishment is central to "*India's strategic thinking*".<sup>8</sup> However, by voluntarily renouncing its sovereign rights of the first use of the nuclear weapons to defeat the nuclear threats and to prevent nuclear blackmail, India has made immense strategic sacrifice and has imposed a heavy burden upon itself. The government and key decision makers recognize that should deterrence ever break down, India will have to pay an enormous price for a nuclear first strike by an adversary before retaliating. Hence, India's no first use doctrine demands a robust, infallible and potentially insuperable nuclear deterrent capability to ensure that India does not suffer a nuclear strike.

The new-found official fascination with the doctrine of deterrence marks a low point in the history of India's nuclear policy. It opens the door in the subcontinent to the dangers of nuclear brinkmanship, and condemns the peoples of India and Pakistan to live under the shadow of the threat of nuclear annihilation. The democratic campaign against nuclear weaponisation in India must put up as a key demand on the Government of India the rejection of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence and its Indian variant, the 'minimum credible nuclear deterrent'. It must demand a return to the path of an active advocacy of global nuclear disarmament.

If we talk of the implications of India's nuclear doctrine in the subcontinent, it is already evident that deterrence on the subcontinent will achieve precisely the opposite of peace and stability as it has done elsewhere in the world. India's declaration that it will not resort to first use of nuclear weapons carries little conviction with Pakistan, which sees its nuclear arms as a hedge against India's conventional superiority. The unilateral nature of the 'minimum' in India's minimum credible deterrent, which is to be determined by India as the situation warrants. As far as Pakistan<sup>9</sup> is concerned the building of India's second-strike capability will constantly tend to trigger a response, as has happened after the Agni-II tests. An arms race is clearly on, notwithstanding pious statements to the contrary from both nations.

### References:

1. RAND Corporation, "Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century.
2. Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd), Nuclear Defence, Shaping the Arsenal, 2001 p. 29.
3. Amarjeet Singh, "Myth of Nuclear Deterrence", 2003.
4. Suo Moto Statement of the Prime Minister in Parliament (New Delhi: 27 May 1998.
5. Draft Report of the National Security Advisory Board on the Indian Nuclear Doctrine of the National Security Council (New Delhi: 17 Aug 1999).
6. K. Subrahmanyam, "Not a Numbers Game: Nuclear Deterrence," The Times of India, 01 Dec 98.
7. Arpit Rajain, Nuclear Deterrence in Southern Asia, 2006.
8. Jasjit Singh, in Foreword to G. Kanwal, Nuclear Defence: Shaping the Arsenal (New Delhi: Knowledge World 2001), pp. xii-xiii.
9. N.C. Menon, "Pak N-Arms Superior to India: Report". The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, June 9, 2000.