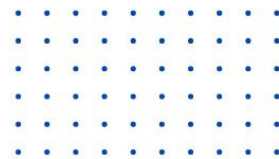




# THE EVOLUTION OF NUCLEAR DOCTRINES IN SOUTH ASIA : IMPLICATIONS OF INDIA'S NFU POLICY REASSESSMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The No-First-Use (NFU) policy within the context of nuclear doctrines constitutes a formal declaration wherein a state possessing nuclear capabilities affirms its commitment not to initiate the use of nuclear weapons during a crisis. This commitment serves as a strategic assurance to adversaries, aiming to diminish the likelihood of the actual deployment of nuclear arms. The NFU pledge has remained a part of the declared Indian nuclear doctrine despite changes in other tenets of its nuclear posture over the years. However, the past decade has witnessed a notable upswing in statements, political declarations, and military developments hinting at the potential withdrawal of this commitment by Indian nuclear policymakers, thereby introducing complexities into the strategic stability of South Asia. In this context, this paper explores the evolution of nuclear doctrines in South Asia, with a specific focus on the repercussions of potential revocation of India's NFU pledge. It delves into factors triggering India's NFU policy revision, encompassing shifts in the global and regional security landscape, technological advancements, and diplomatic considerations. The paper also offers policy recommendations for Pakistan aimed at augmenting its own security in light of Indian developments, advocating for arms control measures, and delineating the international community's role in promoting stability.

**Keywords:** Nuclear Doctrines, India, Pakistan, No-First-Use, Strategic Stability, Regional Stability, Nuclear Policies

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The delicate balance of power in the South Asian nuclear landscape is one of the defining features of the geo-politics of this region. This dynamic stems from the historical and geopolitical contexts that have defined the region for decades. The possession of nuclear capabilities has become a central factor, intricately woven into the fabric of regional politics, security dynamics, and strategic considerations. The watershed moment in this landscape occurred in 1998 when India, after maintaining that its 1974 nuclear test code-named Smiling Buddha was of peaceful nature, finally and officially declared itself a nuclear power through a series of tests conducted at the Pokhran Test Range.

India's nuclear tests, code-named "Operation Shakti," marked a significant transformation in the regional security calculus. The tests were not only a demonstration of prestige but also signalled a shift in India's security doctrine. They were justified as a response to perceived security threats, particularly from its historical rivals, Pakistan, as well as to assert India's strategic autonomy on the global stage.

Foreseeably, Pakistan responded with its own series of nuclear tests, conducted in the Chagai Hills on 28 May 1998. This reciprocal nuclearisation of the Indian sub-continent created an environment where the stakes were not only high but also accompanied by the spectre of nuclear conflict. The longstanding historical rivalries and territorial disputes between India and Pakistan added layers of complexity to an already intricate security landscape. The introduction of nuclear capabilities brought forth a new set of challenges and considerations for both nations. Concerns about stability, deterrence, and the potential for nuclear conflict became paramount.

Against this backdrop, India's adoption of the No-First-Use (NFU) policy was significant especially in the eyes of the global community. India marketed its declared NFU policy as a strategic decision to refrain from initiating the use of nuclear weapons in any conflict, thus signalling to the international community a commitment to responsible nuclear behaviour and a defensive posture. However, the efficacy of this policy was always in question keeping in mind the Indian assertiveness against its regional nuclear rivals as well as the potential revision of this policy in later years. Combined, all these have raised questions about the evolving nature of India's nuclear doctrine and its implications for regional stability.

The purpose and scope of this paper lies in understanding the intricacies of South Asia's nuclear dynamics, focusing on nuclear doctrines and particularly on the potential revocation of India's NFU policy. By examining the historical context, the significance of the NFU policy, and the implications of its revocation, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing nuclear doctrinal developments in the region.

## **2. EVOLUTION OF NUCLEAR DOCTRINES IN SOUTH ASIA**

### **2.1 Early Years of Nuclearisation**

Pakistan and India began their quest for nuclear weapons in the 1970's and 80's in order to deter their perceived threats. For Pakistan, the motivation was the threat emanated from India whereas India claimed a two front threat from Pakistan as well as from China.

In his seminal work, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb" Scott Sagan has outlined three models which explain a state's

inclination towards nuclearisation.<sup>1</sup> These include the Security Model, where security is the main factor, the Domestic Politics Model, where bureaucratic interests reign supreme and the Norms Model, which emphasises on the modernity and identity symbolism of nuclear weapons.

For India, all three models held some appeal; it perceived a security threat from Pakistan and China; the domestic political party of the time the Bharatya Janta Party (BJP) was a big supporter of nuclear weapons development owing to their own political considerations; and the collective Indian psyche was unrelenting on enhancing its global stature. Thus nuclear weapons development was seen as a symbol of prestige.

Pakistan's quest for a nuclear weapons program stemmed primarily from their value as a deterrent against India, thus the security model best explains the Pakistani case. Mark Fitzpatrick asserts that Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons was a direct response and motivated by the threat it perceived from the Indian nuclear and space program. Every aspect of the Pakistani nuclear posture is corresponding to the Indian threat.<sup>2</sup>

India started its quest for nuclear weapons much earlier than Pakistan, as it when it conducted a Peaceful Nuclear Explosion (PNE) in 1974; however both countries became overtly nuclear in May 1998.<sup>3</sup> Soon after nuclearisation, the resolve of both states was tested when the Kargil conflict broke out in 1999. This conflict was unique in many ways: it occurred only one year post nuclearisation, there was a high number of casualties and despite being limited to a specific geographical location, it was the

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<sup>1</sup> Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, no.3 (Winter 1996/1997): 54-86. <https://wjspanel.files.wordpress.com/2019/02/sagan.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fitzpatrick, *Chapter One: Pakistan's nuclear programme*, Adelphi Series, (London: Kings College London), 2013, 15. DOI: 10.1080/19445571.2013.901482

<sup>3</sup> George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 60.

longest of all the Pakistan-India conflicts thus far.<sup>4</sup> The longevity of the conflict heightened the fear of nuclear exchange however; many scholars are of the view that neither side was willing to risk military confrontation and escalation owing to the fear of international repercussions.<sup>5</sup>

While both states showed relative restraint and responsible behaviour during the Kargil Conflict<sup>6</sup>, it soon became clear that they needed to develop a nuclear posture and doctrine in order to codify their nuclear policies.

## 2.2 Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrine

Pakistan's nuclear doctrine remains undeclared and cloaked in deliberate ambiguity, with only a handful of statements by high-ranking officials providing glimpses into its overarching policy. This deliberate ambiguity prevents the disclosure of information pertaining to Pakistan's nuclear thresholds, denying potential adversaries opportunity to exploit any vulnerability in the country's plans.<sup>7</sup>

While refraining from explicit disclosure, carefully crafted statements by Pakistani officials provide enough evidence to formulate a picture of the doctrine. While Pakistan does not endorse a NFU, however the country also does not claim to have a First-Use policy. The official declaration is that Pakistan does not subscribe to a NFU policy or in other words, it has 'No No-First-Use Policy'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nasim Zehra, *From Kargil to the Coup* (Lahore: Sangemeel, 2018), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Zin Mar Khing, "At The Brink of Nuclear War: (Mis)Perceptions & The Kargil Crisis", *E-International Relations*, 23 August 2022, <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/08/23/at-the-brink-of-nuclear-war-misperceptions-the-kargil-crisis/>.

<sup>6</sup> Sitara Noor "Strategic Stability in South Asia: The Evolving Challenges and Potential Opportunities for India and Pakistan" *ISSI Journal*, (2023): 69-70 [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Sitara\\_Noor\\_SS\\_No\\_1\\_2023.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Sitara_Noor_SS_No_1_2023.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Lt Gen Khalid Kidwai, "A Conversation with Gen. Khalid Kidwai," Interview by George Perkovich, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP)*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-230315carnegieKIDWAI.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> "We don't have any 'no first use' policy: Pakistan military", *Economic Times*, September 5, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/we-dont-have-any-no-first-use-policy-pak->



Pakistan articulates a commitment to a Credible Minimum Deterrence (CMD) policy, citing the need to counterbalance India's conventional military prowess as the primary impetus behind its nuclear strategy.<sup>9</sup> The introduction of the "Full Spectrum Deterrence" (FSD) posture in 2013, following the testing of the Nasr short-range ballistic missile, was a response to perceived vulnerabilities in the face of India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD) which aims at swift territorial acquisition through blitzkrieg attacks, under the nuclear overhang.<sup>10</sup> As a deliberate policy, Pakistan refrains from explicitly defining the elusive red-lines that might trigger a nuclear response. This intentional opacity is geared towards deterring any level of aggression from India.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3 Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine (DND) 1999

In the aftermath of the Kargil conflict, owing to the lessons learnt, India developed a limited war nuclear doctrine. The release of the DND in August 1999 served as a reassurance to the Indian populace that the nation possessed the capability to deter potential adversaries, with Pakistan being the immediate concern post-Kargil.

According to the DND, "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 the first to initiate a nuclear strike, but will respond with punitive retaliation should deterrence fail."<sup>12</sup>

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military/articleshow/70981526.cms?utm\_source=contentofinterest&utm\_medium=text&utm\_campaign=cpst

<sup>9</sup> Noor "Strategic," 72.

<sup>10</sup> Naveed Ahmad, "India's Elusive 'Cold Start' doctrine and Pakistan's Military Preparedness," *Express Tribune*, January 20, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1300686/indias-elusive-cold-start-doctrine-pakistansmilitary-preparedness/>

<sup>11</sup> Sadia Tasleem, "Pakistan's Nuclear Use Doctrine," *CEIP*, June 30, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/30/pakistan-s-nuclear-use-doctrine-pub-63913>

<sup>12</sup> NSAB, "Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine," *National Security Advisory Board*, (New Delhi: 1999), <http://mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?18916/Draft+Report+of+National+Security+Advisory+Board+on+Indian+Nuclear+Doctrine>

While India pledged adherence to NFU, it simultaneously pledged punitive retaliation should the need arise.<sup>13</sup> Keeping the Indian declared policy of CMD in mind, the punitive retaliation declaration seems to be in contradiction.

Analysing the DND reveals certain incongruities in its language. While emphasising its commitment to NFU and disarmament, the DND concurrently underscored the completion of the nuclear triad, presenting a complex and seemingly contradictory composition. Furthermore, the DND asserted the maintenance of highly effective conventional capabilities, indicating a preference for exhausting conventional or sub-conventional options before resorting to nuclear measures.

## 2.4 Indian Official Nuclear Doctrine 2003

The DND faced a critical juncture during the 2001-2002 Twin Peaks crisis, when India declared that it was constrained by nuclear deterrence, US diplomatic intervention, and a dearth of effective conventional alternatives against Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> To address domestic criticism stemming from its inability to prevent the crisis, India released an official nuclear doctrine in 2003.<sup>15</sup> The fundamental tenets of this doctrine mirror those outlined in the DND, with a few nuanced differences.

The policy of CMD was repeated in the 2003 document, emphasising the imperative of possessing a nuclear capability sufficient to deter potential adversaries. Additionally, the 2003 document also reiterated adherence to NFU pledge, with the addendum that nuclear weapons will be deployed in response to a nuclear attack on

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<sup>13</sup> Tanzeela Khalil and Sameer Ali Khan, Debating Potential Doctrinal Changes in India's Nuclear Ambitions, *IPRI Journal* (August 2018): 56-57, <https://www.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Article-3-8-Aug-2018.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Polly Nayak and Michael Krepon "US Crisis Management in South Asia's Twin Peaks Crisis," *Stimson Center*, September 2014, 17-19, [https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Twin Peaks Crisis.pdf](https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Twin%20Peaks%20Crisis.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> "Cabinet Committee On Security Reviews Progress In Operationalising India's Nuclear Doctrine," *Office of the Prime Minister*, January 4, 2003, <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/lreng/lyr2003/rjan2003/04012003/r040120033.html>

Indian Territory or on Indian forces, irrespective of the geographic location of the aggression.

An added caveat was in the event of a nuclear first strike, whereby the doctrine vowed a massive retaliatory response designed to inflict unacceptable damage upon the aggressor. In addition, a categorical commitment was made to refrain from employing nuclear weapons against states that do not possess nuclear capabilities.

Perhaps the most significant deviation from the DND, was the added stipulation was that in the face of a major attack involving biological or chemical weapons against India or its forces anywhere, India would retain the option to retaliate with nuclear weapons. This deviation introduced a nuanced complexity, potentially diluting the unequivocal nature of the NFU pledge, as it implied a scenario where nuclear weapons might be employed first by India in response to the adversary's use of either chemical or biological weapons.<sup>16</sup>

In essence, the progression from the DND to the 2003 official nuclear doctrine was envisioned to maintain a semblance of continuity in India's nuclear policy, albeit with some refinements.

## **2.5 Significance of the Indian NFU Pledge**

The adoption of the NFU policy was, in part, a strategic response to allay concerns both domestically and internationally. Domestically, it served as a means to assuage apprehensions regarding the potential misuse of nuclear weapons. The policy

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<sup>16</sup> The rationale behind the expanded scope of the NFU pledge lay in the number of casualties caused by any chemical and biological attacks. If the number of casualties from such attacks were catastrophic, only then would India respond with nuclear weapons. According to Dr Ashley Tellis, acceptance of disarmament obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) meant that India had foregone the ability to respond symmetrically to such attacks by either chemical or biological weapons. It would thus, need to resort to nuclear weapons in case the casualties were massive.

reinforced the narrative that India's nuclear capabilities were not intended for offensive purposes but rather as a deterrent against external aggression, assuaging concerns about nuclear adventurism.<sup>17</sup>

Regionally and internationally, the pledge served as a tool to assuage China, Pakistan and more importantly the international community that India is a responsible nuclear weapon state, it does not desire unnecessary escalation and wants to maintain strategic stability.<sup>18</sup> The deliberate ambiguity in the policy allowed for enough flexibility, providing India room to respond to evolving threats without compromising on its commitments.

### **3. EVOLUTION OF NUCLEAR THREAT PERCEPTIONS IN SOUTH ASIA**

The Indian nuclear doctrine has not undergone any written changes since the publication of the 2003 document; however recent shifts in the nuclear threat perceptions in South Asia have resulted in both countries looking to diversify their doctrines and policies.

The equilibrium in conventional force balance holds equal significance alongside the nuclear dimension in South Asia. The impetus for Pakistan's nuclear development has historically been grounded in the formidable conventional might of India, a force that economic constraints render impossible for Pakistan to match on a tank-to-tank basis. However, recent years have witnessed a notable widening of the gap in conventional force structures between the two nations.

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<sup>17</sup> Toby Dalton, "Much Ado About India's No-first-use Nuke Policy", *CEIP*, September 26, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/09/26/much-ado-about-india-s-no-first-use-nuke-policy-pub-79952>

<sup>18</sup> Lora Saalman, "India's no-first-use dilemma: Strategic consistency or ambiguity towards China and Pakistan", *SIPRI*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/indias-no-first-use-dilemma-strategic-consistency-or-ambiguity-towards-china-and-pakistan>

The fiscal year 2023-24 saw India proposing a substantial defence budget of \$72.6 billion.<sup>19</sup> In stark contrast, Pakistan's defence budget for 2023-24 stood at \$ 6.27 billion, highlighting the significant gap in defence expenditures.<sup>20</sup> The disparity in the defence spending of both countries is not a new phenomenon. Looking at the statistical data (Figure. 1), it is clear that the defence spending of both countries has been in stark contrast for many years. With India enjoying such an asymmetric advantage in its defence budget, Pakistan cannot hope to match its conventional might. The augmentation of this conventional superiority with war-fighting tendencies and refuting the NFU pledge adds to Pakistan's insecurity when it comes to its eastern adversary.

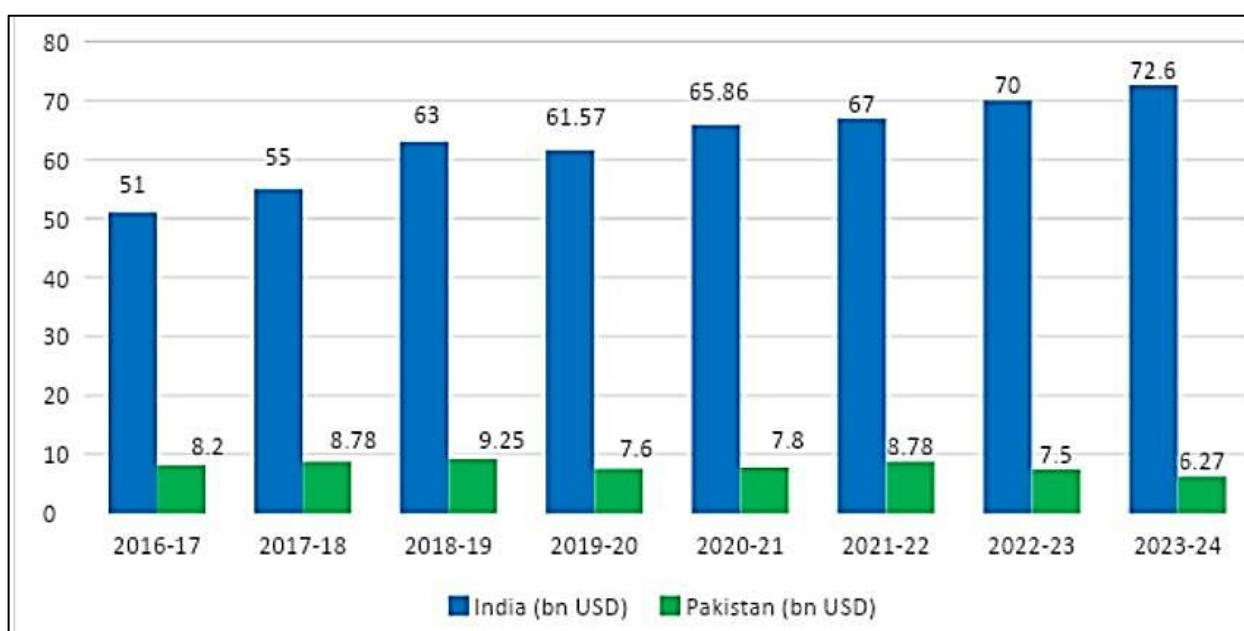


Figure 1: Comparison of Indian and Pakistan Defence Budgets 2017 – 2024

In addition, India's relentless acquisition of sophisticated weapon systems, fuelled by its higher military spending, has resulted in a discernible conventional imbalance, prompting heightened concern within Pakistan. Confronted with economic

<sup>19</sup> Defence Budget 2023–24: Trend Analysis, IDSA, February 17, 2023, [https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/Defence-Budget-2023-24\\_170223](https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/Defence-Budget-2023-24_170223)

<sup>20</sup> Usman Ansari, "Pakistan unveils increased defense budget, IMF decries spending plan", *Defence News*, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2023/06/22/pakistan-unveils-increased-defense-budget-imf-decries-spending-plan/>

limitations that curtail its ability to rival India's conventional prowess, Pakistan has strategically adjusted its approach. This recalibration included an increased reliance on nuclear weapons as a means of balancing the military asymmetry with India.

With the changing nature of the US-China competition, South Asian security dynamics have also undergone significant shifts. India's elevated status as a perceived counterweight to China has altered the strategic landscape, while Pakistan's significance, notably as a frontline ally in the war on terror, has diminished post US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This altered perception positions India favourably, allowing it to break free from the historical India-Pakistan equation and forge greater strategic partnerships with the US.

These changing regional dynamics, driven by external rebalancing and evolving nuclear threat perceptions, have also prompted a recalibration of India's nuclear policies, especially the NFU pledge. This can be seen as a tactic to distance itself and eventually completely de-hyphenation from Pakistan.

## **4. REVISION OF THE INDIAN NFU PLEDGE**

Despite inconsistencies, the Indian NFU pledge has endured for several decades, however, recent discussions about its re-evaluation under the guise of evolving nuclear threat perceptions in South Asia underscore India's nuanced approach to the perceived strategic challenges. The NFU pledge, therefore, stands not only as a historical marker but also as a subject of ongoing scholarly inquiry.

### **4.1 Statements and Views on NFU Revocation**

#### **4.1.1 Academic Views**

The discourse surrounding the reassessment of the NFU pledge within Indian academic and scholastic circles is marked by a dichotomy of perspectives. While there

are proponents of keeping the pledge intact, there are also dissenting voices who advocate for doctrinal revision.

Within the first faction, proponents contend that due to India's perceived lack of operational capability to effectively sustain NFU, a policy overhaul is imperative.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the second faction posits its support for doctrinal revision based on India's current incapacity to either dissuade Pakistan's alleged support for terrorists or to assert a credible pre-emptive threat as purported by P. R. Chari<sup>22</sup>

Dr Manpreet Sethi, a renowned Indian scholar, is one of the few voices within the Indian strategic community who advocate for maintaining the NFU pledge. She posits that maintaining an NFU allows India to preclude the need for costly nuclear weapons development required to maintain a doctrine of first use.<sup>23</sup> She also asserts that maintaining an NFU pledge puts the onus of escalation on the other nuclear weapon state.

Echoing similar sentiments, Admiral Verghese Koithara posits that keeping an NFU pledge precludes the requirement for war fighting approaches such as counter-force targeting, mating of delivery systems in peace time and induction of short-range weapons; all of which would incur great expenses and add further complexity.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, Bharat Karnad, a proponent of NFU revision argues that maintaining this pledge is only possible for states which have an extreme level of confidence in the survivability of their nuclear forces for an adequate retaliatory strike.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Abhijit Iyer-Mitra, "India's Nuclear Imposture," *New York Times*, May 11, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/opinion/indias-nuclear-imposture.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/opinion/indias-nuclear-imposture.html?_r=1).

<sup>22</sup> P.R. Chari, "India's Nuclear Doctrine: Stirrings of Change" (Washington, D.C.: CEIP, 2014), 37.

<sup>23</sup> Manpreet Sethi, *Nuclear Strategy: India's March Towards Credible Deterrence* (New Delhi: Knowledge World / Centre for Air Power Studies, 2009), 130–31.

<sup>24</sup> Verghese Koithara, *Managing India's Nuclear Forces* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 84–85.

<sup>25</sup> Bharat Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons and Indian Security: The Realist Foundations of Strategy* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 2002), 442.

He also posits that the NFU pledge is unenforceable and can only be applied in peace times. During times of war under existential threats, this pledge will be the first thing to go.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Views of Indian Government Officials

Similar sentiments have been echoed by Indian governmental officials. In 2019 Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that, “India may not feel indefinitely bound to NFU. Till today, our nuclear policy is ‘no first use’. What happens in future depends on the circumstances.”<sup>27</sup>

This was not the first instance of an Indian official making an off-handed remark about the Indian NFU pledge. In 2016, Rajnath Singh’s predecessor Manohar Parrikar, had said that, “Why should I bind myself (to an NFU doctrine)? I should say I am a responsible nuclear power and I will not use it irresponsibly.”<sup>28</sup>

As early as 2010, then National Security Adviser, Shivshankar Menon, implied that NFU does not apply to nuclear-armed powers by stating that India’s doctrine is “No First Use against non-nuclear weapon states.”<sup>29</sup>

In his book, ‘Choices Inside the Making of Indian Foreign Policy’, Mr Menon also alluded to a first-strike being an option for India, “Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against an NWS that had

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<sup>26</sup> Karnad, *Nuclear Weapons*, 443.

<sup>27</sup> “‘No First Use’ nuclear policy depends on circumstances: Rajnath Singh,” *The Hindu*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-first-use-nuclear-policy-depends-on-circumstances-rajnath-singh/article29109149.ece>

<sup>28</sup> “Why be bound by a ‘no first use’ N-Policy”, *Times of India*, November 11, 2016, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/55363805.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/55363805.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>29</sup> “Speech by NSA Shri Shivshankar Menon at NDC on ‘the Role of Force in Strategic Affairs,’” *Indian Ministry of External Affairs*, October 21, 2010, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/798/Speech+by+NSA+Shri+Shivshankar+Menon+at+NDC+on+The+Role+of+Force+in+Strategic+Affairs>.



declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were certain that adversary's launch was imminent.”<sup>30</sup>

Even earlier, in 2009, then Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor stated that, “If Pakistan is expanding its arsenal, India may have to reconsider its strategic stance on NFU.”<sup>31</sup> Thus the debate on the revocation of the NFU pledge is not new. The seeds had been planted as early as 2009 by Indian policy makers, scholars and academics.

#### 4.1.3 BJP's Stance

Perhaps the most credible challenge to the existing NFU pledge came before the 2014 elections, when BJP in their election manifesto announced that they will “study in detail India’s nuclear doctrine, revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times.”<sup>32</sup> This proclamation, laden with significance, becomes even more formidable when juxtaposed with the BJP's historical precedent. Notably, in their 1998 election manifesto, the party had declared its intention to test nuclear weapons<sup>33</sup>—an assurance that was indeed fulfilled in 1999.

This historical context renders the 2014 manifesto declaration a particularly weighty and challenging commitment, considering the BJP's track record of translating electoral promises into concrete actions. The fact that they did not publically follow through with this particular promise means little given how the trajectory of Indian nuclear developments shifted in the aftermath of BJP's election win.

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<sup>30</sup> Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 105–123.

<sup>31</sup> “May have to revisit nuclear no-first use policy: Army chief, *Times of India*, 6 September 2009, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/4977129.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/4977129.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)

<sup>32</sup> “BJP Election Manifesto: Ek Bharat - Shreshtha Bharat,” *BJP*, 2014, [://www.bjp.org/images/pdf\\_2014/full\\_manifesto\\_english\\_07.04.2014.pdf](http://www.bjp.org/images/pdf_2014/full_manifesto_english_07.04.2014.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> “BJP Election Manifesto: Our Nation's Security,” *BJP*, 1998, <http://www.bjp.org/documents/manifesto/bjp-election-manifesto1998/chapter-8>.

## 4.2 Strategic Developments and Revocation of NFU

On their own, such statements and declarations by Indian government officials and academics can be disregarded as overzealous sentiments. However, coupled with discernable augmentation of military capabilities by India which alludes towards a war-fighting doctrine, as well as tendencies for first-strike and pre-emption, these statements warrant a serious inspection of the continued relevance and implementation of the NFU pledge.

### 4.2.1 Cannisterisation

Under the guise of Chinese threat, India has been investing heavily in the development of long-range missiles, such as the Agni V cannisterised 7000 km range ballistic missile<sup>34</sup>, dedicated for Chinese high value targets. However, there is nothing stopping the same missiles from being used against Pakistan.

Cannisterisation of the Agni V and other missiles is clearly indicative of a more ready war-fighting arsenal even during peace times. Additionally, many of the missiles tested and technologies integrated into the battlefield in recent times point towards a more belligerent India with counter-force tendencies which indicate a departure from the stated NFU pledge.

### 4.2.2 Missile Developments

In January 2023, India conducted the third test of its Hypersonic Technology Demonstration Vehicle (HSTDV), an unmanned hypersonic scramjet aircraft capable of carrying hypersonic and long-range cruise missiles.<sup>35</sup> This was followed by a successful

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<sup>34</sup> "Agni-V can now strike targets beyond 7,000 km if India wants; 20% weight reduced: Report". *Hindustan Times*. December 17, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/agniv-can-now-strike-targets-beyond-7-000-km-if-india-wants-20-weight-reduced-report-101671286138628.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Abdul Moiz Khan and Usman Haider, Emerging Missile Technologies: A New Arms Race in South Asia?. *South Asian Voices*, January 19, 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/emerging-missile-technologies-a-new-arms-race-in-south-asia/>

test of the Agni Prime missile which boasts a range of 1000-2000 km.<sup>36</sup> In September 2023 India tested the extended range Brahmos Missile from all three platforms, land, sea and air.<sup>37</sup> In addition, India is developing an array of shorter range missiles against hard or soft counter-force targets including military bases or concentrated armoured formations. The 150 km range Prahaar tactical ballistic missile is an example which aims to bridge the gap between the two existing short range Pinaka and the longer range Prithvi missiles.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4.2.3 Induction of BMD

All these developments coupled with the induction of the newly purchased Russian S-400 batteries as part of the layered Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) signal a clear move towards a counter-force strategy which would not preclude a potential first-strike or pre-emptive strike by the Indian forces opposite to its stated NFU pledge.

The combination of weapons in a state of launch-on-warning, combined with more precise warheads, cannisterisation of missiles, as well as a layered BMD system indicate a shift in the Indian nuclear policy towards first-strike strategy with pre-emptive underpinnings. This strategy would entail using nuclear missiles first to disarm a nuclear adversary and then relying on missile defences to intercept any nuclear assets which survive the disarming strike.”<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Indo-US Military Deals

These developments are backed by military technology pacts as well such as the recent Indo-US defence deals which are aimed at augmenting the Indian military might,

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<sup>36</sup> “Agni Prime ballistic missile successfully flight-tested by DRDO off Odisha coast,” *Ministry of Defence Press Release*, June 8, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1930689>

<sup>37</sup> Khan and Haider, *Emerging Missile Technologies*.

<sup>38</sup> Clary and Narang, *India's Counterforce*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, *India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities, International Security* (2019): 25, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/43/3/7/12216/India-s-Counterforce-Temptations-Strategic>.

presumably against China. However, most of the times these newer technologies are deployed at India's western border with Pakistan.

Although India and US have signed a plethora of deals in recent times, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), however, the most important one with regards to the revocation of the NFU pledge is the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) signed in October 2020.<sup>40</sup> This agreement allows India to acquire armed unmanned aerial vehicles as well as the use of US geospatial maps to accrue pinpoint accuracy of automated hardware systems and weapons like cruise and ballistic missiles.

Acquisition of newer war-fighting technologies as well as access to improved Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities through US geospatial maps can lure India into a false sense of security and incentivise pre-emptive first strike options. This will also encourage a more aggressive nuclear posture which precludes an NFU policy.

These strategic moves clearly reflect a departure from previous nuclear postures, indicating a heightened readiness and assertiveness in the country's approach to nuclear deterrence. Although there has not been a public announcement explicitly renouncing the NFU pledge, the assertiveness demonstrated by India in its recent nuclear actions coupled with the statements by Indian academics and leadership renders such a declaration unnecessary.

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<sup>40</sup> "BECA, and the importance of 3 foundational pacts of India-US defence cooperation," *Indian Express*, November 3, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/beca-india-us-trade-agreements-rajnath-singh-mike-pompeo-6906637/>.

### 4.3 Implications of India's NFU Policy Revision

Against this backdrop of shifting nuclear postures and heightened assertiveness in India's nuclear doctrine, it is imperative to assess the potential implications of NFU revision. India's evolving strategic posture aims to prompt uncertainty in Pakistan's threat perception, intentionally destabilise Pakistan's deterrence posture and mobilise the Indian Military-Industrial Complex to enhance war-fighting capabilities.<sup>41</sup>

Mobilisation of the Indian Military-Industrial Complex focuses on enhancing war-fighting capabilities, emphasising precision in network-centric systems. By leveraging technological advancements, India aims to bolster its military effectiveness, ensuring a sophisticated and modernised defence infrastructure.

All these recent Indian nuclear and doctrinal developments as well as technology transfer agreements with the US profoundly impact Pakistan's nuclear threat perception. The induction of the MIRV Ababeel by Pakistan in 2018 was in direct response to the development of the Indian BMD system which has been further augmented in recent years with the induction of the S-400 batteries.<sup>42</sup>

The practice of keeping the missiles separate from the warheads has historically been perceived as essential component in support of the NFU commitment. Cannisterisation of missiles by India even during peace times can be characterised as another aggressive move and a departure from its declared nuclear doctrinal positions. This shift, while not conclusive evidence of abandoning NFU, opens avenues for potential first-strike pre-emptive scenarios.

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<sup>41</sup> Dr Rizwana Abbasi, 'India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine and India-Pakistan "No Attack on Each Other's Facilities"' (Presentation at SVI Seminar on January 23, 2018), <https://thesvi.org/indias-shifting-nuclear-doctrine-and-india-pakistan-no-attack-on-each-others-facilities/>.

<sup>42</sup> Usman Haider and Moiz Khan, "Why did Pakistan Test its MIRV Capable Ababeel Missile", *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/11/why-did-pakistan-test-its-mirv-capable-ababeel-missile/>.

The adoption of such a posture comes with inherent risks. Firstly, the heightened readiness created by missiles mated to warheads raises the spectre of accidental use, triggered by false alarms or unauthorised access, especially in the event of a crisis. Given the proximity between Pakistan and India, the short missile flight times amplify the urgency and gravity of this risk.

Additionally, there's an increased likelihood of severe accidents involving nuclear weapons or their delivery systems, encompassing missiles and aircraft. Moreover, while Pakistani officials remain sceptical of Indian doctrinal commitments, however, the NFU pledge allows Pakistan to continue to keep its missiles and warheads in a de-mated form.<sup>43</sup> It would be difficult for Pakistan to continue to maintain this policy if the adversary does not subscribe to an NFU pledge has a ready arsenal with mated missiles and is considering first-strike counter-force targeting.

It would be in the Indian interest to lead Pakistan towards a lose-it-or-use-it dilemma, by which it could force Pakistan towards more pre-emptive tendencies as well. Such a move would be highly destabilising for the region. Since India is instigating such war-fighting tendencies in the South Asian nuclear environment, it is incumbent upon India to shoulder the responsibility of not compelling Pakistan towards such assertive measures.<sup>44</sup>

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Navigating the evolving regional landscape and the changing contours of India's nuclear doctrine demands that Pakistan adopts nuanced measures to secure its nuclear deterrent. While a range of stringent measures, such as investing in pre-emptive capabilities and implementing a decentralised command and control structure, can be

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<sup>43</sup> Khalil and Khan, *Debating*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> Khalil and Khan, *Debating*, 75.

suggested, they carry inherent aggression and risk. Nevertheless, in addressing this delicate situation, policymakers can contemplate the following policy recommendations.

### **5.1 Enhanced Dispersal and Mobility**

Faced with evolving threats, Pakistan can enhance the dispersal and mobility of its nuclear assets. Innovative strategies aimed at minimising vulnerability to pre-emptive strikes could be devised, leveraging cutting-edge technologies and adaptive deployment practices. The Pakistani Nasr missile with its shoot-and-scoot capability is a good example in this regard.

### **5.2 Enhanced Survivability and Retaliatory Capabilities**

The induction of the MIRV Ababeel by Pakistan was a strategic move to maintain the balance in the Pak-India nuclear equation. It was a measure specifically designed to potentially counter the Indian BMD. In the same regard, Pakistani policy makers should invest in technologies which enhance the survivability and responsiveness of the Pakistani nuclear deterrent. The focus should be on pre-emptive rather than reactive measures which do not impinge upon Pakistan's declared nuclear policies while enhancing the deterrent value of its nuclear capabilities.

### **5.3 Investing in Enhanced ISR Capabilities**

Given Indian proclivity towards clandestine developments in the nuclear domain, which come to light many years later, Pakistan should work towards enhancing its own ISR capabilities to monitor and assess developments across the border. This can include investing in technologies like early warning systems, reconnaissance, and surveillance to ensure a timely and accurate response to threats emanating from the Indian side.

## **5.4 Maintaining a Principled Stance on Deterrence**

Pakistan's commitment to its policy of FSD in-line with the dictates of CMD should be steadfast and communicated as such to the adversary. Reiterating its resolve to respond effectively to any aggression is pivotal in dissuading India from contemplating a first-strike scenario. However, allowing aggressive Indian nuclear doctrinal developments to dissuade Pakistan from its declared policy of minimalism within the construct of credibility would be detrimental. The onus of responsibility should continue to be on the instigator of aggression in the regional context.

## **5.5 Emphasising Conflict Resolution at Track-1 and 2 levels**

Diplomatic overtures including prioritising conflict resolution efforts should continue to be the priority strategy for Pakistan even in the face of Indian rejection. Dialogue channels should be kept open, emphasising diplomatic solutions and reducing the propensity for military confrontation.

Additionally, encouraging academic and Track II dialogues between experts and strategists from India and Pakistan could foster a conducive environment for brainstorming solutions. These unofficial channels may generate innovative ideas and contribute to building mutual trust.

## **5.6 Engagement in Bilateral Nuclear Talks**

The Composite Dialogue between Pakistan and India has been in a halt for many years. While it was not as successful as it was envisioned to be when proposed in 1998, nevertheless, lack of any dialogue has been detrimental of the strategic relations between Pakistan and India. Thus, Pakistan could explore new diplomatic channels for direct nuclear talks with India to address concerns, clarify intentions, and foster mutual understanding.



## 6. CONCLUSION

The re-evaluation of the Indian nuclear doctrine particularly the NFU pledge signifies a strategic shift in the India-Pakistan relations. While the nuclear doctrine of any state is bound to undergo shifts as its security calculus changes over the years, however, the nuances of nuclear doctrines are delicate. The Indian allusions towards revocation of the NFU pledge will have repercussions which will reverberate not only across the region but also globally.

The strategic realignment in play in India since the BJP government came in power reflects an assertive posture which has manifested through enhanced military and nuclear capabilities. The emphasis on counter-force targeting, cannisterisation of missiles even in peace times, and an increased frequency of missile tests also projects a heightened readiness and a departure from previous doctrinal postures.

If India were to actually enact any change in even one of the tenets of its nuclear doctrine, for example its NFU pledge, it will have a cascading effect on the other tenets of its nuclear policy as well as on the regional stability.

In light of this Indian aggression, Pakistan has to maintain a delicate balance so as to effectively navigate this new and increasingly complex regional security landscape. However, the onus of responsibility should continue to be firmly placed on Indian policymakers, by virtue of their proclivity towards aggressive policies and belligerent tendencies. As South Asia grapples with these changing dynamics, informed and nuanced policy decisions by all relevant stakeholders become paramount to mitigate risks, deter aggression, and uphold security in this critical geo-political region.

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