

India's Nuclear Policy under NDA Government: An Analysis

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Abstract: *In democracies, consecutive governments often change the policy of previous governments. But there are some established areas where the broad consensus prohibits any radical shift. India's nuclear doctrine is also one such area where successive governments have maintained a continuous, conservative approach. During first term of Narendra Modi government, there is much speculation about shift in nuclear policy, but a broad based consensus demonstrated a continuous validation of nuclear doctrine. The BJP government during this period experienced two deadliest attacks namely, Uri attack in 2016 and Pulwama attack in 2019. But, the government's reaction to these attacks differs from the tactical and strategic moves undertaken by the previous governments in the past. In this backdrop, the present paper seeks to find out whether there really has been a change in India's current nuclear strategy. Although India is self-restrained in its nuclear strategy, it would be interesting to see future strategy of the country in this arena.*

Keywords: Nuclear Doctrine, NFU, BJP, Uri attack, Pulwama attack.

Introduction

It has been more than two decades since India has become a nuclear power in 1998. In democracies, consecutive governments often change the policy of previous governments. But there are some established areas where the broad consensus prohibits any radical shift. India's nuclear doctrine is also one such area where successive governments have maintained a continuous, conservative approach. There may be a shift in the technical requirement of the programme for example the pace of programme usually depends upon the personal character of a leader, but overall the nuclear policy has not changed irrespective of whichever party is in power whether the Congress or BJP (Sethi, 2017). Even during the first term of Modi government, there is much speculation about shift in nuclear policy, but a broad based consensus demonstrated a continuous validation of nuclear doctrine. Compared to other global nuclear powers including North Korea, India's nuclear weapons are less in number. However, this has helped the country to maintain basic

minimum credible deterrence while minimizing nuclear escalation risk. Since India has maintained secrecy about its nuclear weapons, the ambiguity arising from the contradictory statements given by political leaders regarding nuclear policy has made some analysts to speculate on it (Jaishankar, 2017). In this backdrop, the present paper seeks to find out whether there really has been a change in India's current nuclear strategy. The analysis has been made in two broad sections. First, India's nuclear doctrine has been examined with special reference to BJP Election Manifesto 2014 for Lok Sabha polls and second, government response to 2016 Uri attack and 2019 Pulwama attack has been studied.

India's Nuclear Doctrine and Modi Government

In January 2003, Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) led by the then Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee outlined an overview of India's nuclear doctrine. Some of these key tenets are “[1] the building and maintenance of a credible minimum deterrent, [2] a posture of ‘no first use (NFU)’, nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere, [3] Nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage, [4] Non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states” (MEA, GoI, 2003, p. 1). But, there was a major change in the subsequent years. Shivshankar Menon, the then national security advisor, during a speech in 2010 dubbed nuclear doctrine of India as “no first use against non-nuclear weapon states”. It means that nuclear weapons may be used first against another nuclear state (Menon, 2010; Jaishankar, 2017). However such words were not heard again and it seemed merely a momentary signal against India's opponents. But over the last few years, there has been a speculation that the Modi Government may reconsider nuclear doctrine and strategy. A few incidents gave rise to that speculation (Jaishankar, 2017).

First, the BJP Election manifesto 2014 for Lok Sabha polls, pointed out that party would like to “*study in detail India's nuclear doctrine, and revise and update it, to make it relevant to challenges of current times [and] Maintain a credible minimum deterrent that is in tune with changing geostatic realities*” (BJP Election Manifesto 2014, 2014, p. 39). The use of words like revision and upgrading of nuclear doctrine in the Election Manifesto have led some analysts to conclude that India is likely to abandon the policy of ‘no first use’ (Miglani & Chalmers, 2014). However the

doubt was soon cleared. Narendra Modi who, BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate at that time, stated in an interview that *"no first use is a very good initiative of [Vajpayee] and there is no compromise on this. We are very clear on this"*

(NewsX, 2014; Jaishankar, 2017). But another speculation also aroused when India's former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, sparked controversy by stating that, *"Why lot of people say that India has 'no first use' policy, Why should I bind myself to a... I should say I am a responsible nuclear power and I will not use it irresponsibly. This is my thinking. Some of them may immediately tomorrow flash that Parrikar says that nuclear doctrine has changed. It has not changed in any government policy but my concept"* (Singh, 2016, p. 1). However, he later clarified that the government policy has not changed and it was his personal opinion on the matter. Similarly, in August 2019, India's current Defence Minister Rajnath Singh speaking at a ceremony in Pokhran gave rise to discussion on the doctrine of 'no-first-use', where he stated that *"Till today, our nuclear policy is 'no first use'. What happens in future depends on the circumstances"* (Roche, 2019, p. 1). It is noteworthy here that these remarks were made in the heat of exacerbated tensions in Indo-Pak relations due to scrapping of article 370 and the subsequent split of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union territories by the central government (Roche, 2019).

Apart from these statements from the top level politicians, other statements by the military generals have drawn attention that India is reconsidering its nuclear doctrine. For example, in 2014, a Strategic Forces Command (SFC) former chief – Lt. Gen. B.S. Nagal – in an interview to defence magazine, *Force*, stated that the policy of 'nuclear ambiguity' is an alternative to NFU policy. In his words *" nuclear ambiguity that does not allow destruction of the nation and strategic forces at the outset; hence the arsenal is intact for use, further it provides a better range of options to launch decapitating and/ or disarming strikes to deal with the adversary leadership/arsenal"* (Joshi, 2015, p. 16). However, all these statements need a kind of appropriate evaluation. Although BJP manifesto for 2014 general elections pledged to revise and update the nuclear doctrine, however party representatives after winning elections repudiated any intention to alter 'no first use' policy (Rajagopalan, 2017). Furthermore in the 2019 Party Election Manifesto for Lok Sabha polls, BJP did not refer to modifying nuclear policy, despite its earlier promise to adopt the necessary measures to secure the country (Roche, 2019). In the same manner, Manohar Parrikar acknowledged that NFU policy has been the country's stated doctrine', but he didn't endorse it in

his personal capacity. Yet, Nagal preferred policy of ‘nuclear ambiguity’ over NFU (Jaishankar, 2017).

There are few patrons belonging to the Indian strategic community who abandon ‘no first use’ policy. George Perkovich and Toby Dalton, leading nuclear policy experts, have confirmed it by referring the words of a former officer in the Manmohan Singh’s government: *“Pakistan is turning to Cold War tenets that were proved untenable before. Why should we follow them? The mainstream view here has been remarkably consistent. The military may want more options and symmetry—the usual macho sentiment—but this can be swiftly put aside”* (Dalton & Perkovich, 2016, p. 9).

The broad consensus in Indian strategic community is that there is a need to re-examine nuclear doctrine periodically (Indian Pugwash Society, 2016). Although the BJP had made a stir by declaring in its election manifesto that nuclear doctrine will be revisited, but the dominant view irrespective of party line is that India should maintain the conventional position. The BJP’s approval of the policy, particularly its features of NFU has been the right move on country’s nuclear policy. From this perspective, it can be held that the doctrine of ‘no first use’ is based upon both the political and military logic (Sethi, 2017).

Continuity over Change: BJP government and the Question of Nuclear Escalation

The Modi government during its first tenure faced security threats twice in the form of Uri attack 2016 and Pulwama attack 2019. Under these provocations, a resentful public wanted retaliation from the BJP government. Subsequently, the government’s reaction to these attacks differs from the tactical and strategic moves undertaken by the previous governments in the past. The government conducted ‘surgical strikes’ and bombarded terrorist launch pads inside Pakistan-occupied Kashmir across the Line of Control (LoC) (Chadha, Dahiya, Kohli, & Pandalai, 2016). Although it was not a conventional full scale attack, around 40 Pakistani militants were killed in the surgical strike. Despite the fact that Pakistan’s foreign minister Khawaja Asif made a statement that Pakistan would use its nuclear weapons over India, the Pakistani establishment did not acknowledge India’s conduct of surgical strike across the LoC

(The Financial Express, 2016). The denial of Pakistan made the nuclear escalation between these two countries neutral, but overall the reaction from the BJP was a strategic restraint (Pant, 2016).

The second time the crisis unfolded when a convoy of paramilitary vehicles was transporting security forces on the National Highway number- 44 at Lethopora in the Pulwama district of Jammu & Kashmir and a total of 46 soldiers were killed by a vehicle-borne suicide bomber on 14 February 2019. Immediately after the attack, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Pakistan-backed militant outfit, took credit for the attack (First Post, 2019). In order to take revenge for the Pulwama attack, two weeks later, the Modi government carried out an aerial strike and completely dismantled the terror training camps in Balakot sector, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan. It may be noted here that this strike was the first cross-border air bombardment since India had conducted during the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971. Further, this strike has been carried out inside deep Pakistani territory, i.e., Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, not in Pakistani Occupied Kashmir (PoK), a territory over which both the India and Pakistan claim but the latter denies the former claim (Dutta, 2020). After that the signs of retaliation from Pakistan side and the question of confrontation escalating to nuclear conflict are less visible.

Conclusion

In parliamentary democracies, like India, the elected representatives exercise control over nuclear policy. Any change in its nuclear policy is subject to discussion both inside and outside the government. At present, there is no evidence that BJP is trying to change nuclear policy of the country (Jaishankar, 2017). Although the Modi government differs from the previous governments by reacting to the military attack with the launch of surgical strike and aerial strike, it did not encourage nuclear war like its predecessors. Nonetheless the abandon of traditional nuclear policy would not serve the country well, the benefits of knee jerk reactionary nuclear policy could also not be underestimated. It is evident that the present government is almost identical with the previous governments in its approach towards nuclear policy of the country. So far as nuclear escalation is concerned, both the BJP and Congress parties' reaction has been undistinguishable which is obvious from the governments' response to crises so far.

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