

Should India tinker with its 'No First Use' policy?

PARLEY

There is no reason for India to change its policy, which is retaliation and not initiation

Last week, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that the future of India's 'No First Use' (NFU) policy on nuclear weapons depended on "circumstances". Mr. Singh's statement has raised apprehensions on the likely revision of India's NFU policy and nuclear doctrine. In a conversation moderated by Dinakar Peri, Rajesh Rajagopalan and Manpreet Sethi address these concerns. Excerpts:

What does the Defence Minister's statement mean, and does it indicate a likely change in India's NFU policy and nuclear doctrine?

Rajesh Rajagopalan: I am not sure if it is really a revision of India's NFU policy because all he said was that in future the policy might change. That has always been the case. The doctrine is only valid for as long as the government says it is valid. It would be foolish to suggest that doctrines cannot change or that they will hold for all times and under all circumstances. All he was suggesting was that we cannot guarantee that the doctrine will hold for all times.

This is possibly a signal to Pakistan that it should not take India's restraint for granted for all times to come, but I think even that would possibly be an exaggerated reading of the statement. I think Rajnath Singh's statement is somewhat different from former Union Minister Manohar Parrikar's statement. He had said at a book launch that he doesn't understand why we have to wait until we hit back. That was a lot more problematic even though it was clarified subsequently that his statement was his personal view rather than the government's policy. I don't see Mr. Singh's statement as signifying a change in the doctrine. And obviously if we did change the NFU policy, that would not be particularly useful.

This is not the first time a Minister or senior functionary has made such a statement. There have been periodic debates on a revision of India's stand, especially on the NFU policy, in strategic circles.

Revision of the NFU policy was also in the BJP's manifesto in 2014, though it wasn't there in its 2019 manifesto. Is all this indicative of a change at some point?

Manpreet Sethi: I quite agree with how Professor Rajagopalan has interpreted Mr. Singh's statement. I think it is a very normal statement. Policy adjustments get made as situations change. I don't see anything in the statement that is indicative of any desire for change as of now. As regards the BJP manifesto that you mentioned, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear that there was not going to be any revision. Individual voices, most of whom are retired officials who occupied positions of power, have brought up this issue of revision of NFU, but they did not mention any revision of NFU when they were in those positions. Late last year, on the occasion of the announcement of the first deterrence patrol of India's ballistic missile nuclear submarine INS Arihant, the Prime Minister once again reiterated that the basic tenet of India's nuclear doctrine will be NFU. As far as I can see, there is no change in the doctrine on the cards. But having said that, there are always the 'Nuclearazis', who are out with their microscopes to look at everything that has been said and who read more into statements. I think that's what is happening in the case of India's NFU. I do believe it's a good policy and there's no reason for the country to change it.

In the last few years, India's conventional posture has undergone a major shift. This was evident in the 2016 surgical strikes and this year's Balakot airstrike. It also disproved the old belief that under a nuclear overhang, the room for conventional manoeuvre is closed. In that context, isn't stability in the nuclear realm better for India so that there is room in the conventional domain?

RR: Absolutely. I mean obviously we want stability in the nuclear front, but I don't think that stability



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was under threat. Pakistan repeatedly raises this bogey of nuclear escalation every time it engages in some action in terms of sending terrorists across. But that is a way of constraining India's response, as a way of preventing India from responding militarily to those kinds of attacks. The idea is that if you raise the issue, if you bring in nuclear escalation as a threat, it will constrain India's response. It is always a false expectation, a false argument, because there is no direct link between conventional escalation and nuclear escalation.

In Kargil, for example, when we started using air power to dislodge Pakistan air forces from mountain heights, initially Pakistan complained about escalation. It said this could lead to nuclear escalation. But pretty soon it was clear that there was no such thing. Similarly, during the 2016 surgical strikes, Pakistan again complained about the possibility of escalation. But in each of these cases we have not seen any escalation. There are several layers in between, and those layers are where Pakistan has benefited because it can't really escalate to something like Balakot or to surgical strikes.

So, yes, we want nuclear stability and that nuclear stability exists. It is just an exaggeration by Pakistan that nuclear stability is always under threat and anything we do will put it under immense strain.

Of late, we have repeatedly shown that we can take action without it escalating anywhere close to the nuclear level.

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Talking about the escalation matrix, the strategic ambiguity can lead to a response from Pakistan and then in turn from China, India's two nuclear adversaries. Pakistan has been trying to put its nuclear weapons at sea. The U.S. has walked out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty. How will these developments impact the region?

MS: First of all, I don't think any ambiguity has been brought into India's doctrine as of now. I think India is very clear on its NFU policy.

On the likely Pakistan reaction, Pakistan is working on what it calls the full spectrum deterrence capability. So, in terms of the arsenal build-up, I don't think there is going to be any major change except that it will likely show urgency or justification for the large stockpile build-up that it is anyway engaged in. More likely, removal of NFU will put India in a problematic situation because for a credible 'first use' you have to build different kinds of capabilities which will mean going on a different trajectory. So, it is most likely that India will get pulled into

an arms race if it was to remove the NFU.

In terms of China's reaction, I don't see any material changes happening in response to India's capability build-up. In any case, it has a lead on nuclear and delivery systems. It will definitely use the opportunity to denigrate India's status as a responsible nuclear power. So, India's claim to be a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group or for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council will come under strain as a result of that.

Frankly, as far as the response of the rest of the world is concerned, we are already in a situation where arms control is crumbling: the U.S.'s nuclear posture review is talking about limited nuclear war once again. The rest of the world will not care much about this change, except at the rhetoric level where there will be criticism of what is going on. So, my concern is not so much the rest of the world's response to change in NFU, but what it will be for India itself in terms of investment in financial and technological capabilities to make a first use credible. After all, it's not just a question of dropping the 'No' from NFU, it is a matter of making the first use credible and that is not an easy proposition. There is no chance that India has of carrying out in the first strike a disarming or decapitating strike for the kinds of adversaries that we have and therefore we will be sucking ourselves into an arms race if we were to go for a first use doctrine.

Pakistan has been trying to diversify its nuclear arsenal for many years now and has been trying to bridge the gap between conventional and nuclear. I am referring to attempts to put nuclear warheads on conventional submarines following India's nuclear triad taking shape. Does this blur the line between conventional and nuclear and create new risks?

RR: Yes, there is a problem when you use dual-use delivery vehicles and weapons systems. This is the problem we have faced in the past. Say Pakistan is holding its nuclear weapons in some airbase. We may be constrained from attacking that airbase because we wouldn't want

Pakistan to mistake a conventional attack on an airbase as an attack on its nuclear weapons. So, whenever you have dual-use weapons, there is a problem. There is a problem when both may misunderstand a particular platform, base or a submarine as containing nuclear weapons. One may be constrained from attacking that because we don't want to give the impression that we are going after their nuclear weapons. On the other hand, it is an even bigger problem when Pakistan uses these dual-use systems. If a conventional missile or a short-range missile is launched at us, we wouldn't know whether it is a conventional missile or a nuclear missile and therefore it is possible that one may mistake it as an incoming nuclear attack. Even our own armoury has both nuclear and conventional warheads, which is generally bad practice.

In 2013, after Pakistan introduced tactical nuclear weapons or battlefield nuclear weapons, India clarified that it will not distinguish between strategic and tactical nuclear warheads and the doctrine of massive retaliation will apply. Following the recent blurring of lines with dual-use technologies, does the nuclear doctrine as it is still hold?

RR: I don't think that makes a difference. I think whatever the Indian position, any attack would be considered a nuclear attack even if it is a tactical nuclear weapon that is used against Indian forces or Indian territory. It will be considered a full-scale nuclear attack. I think that the response to a tactical nuclear weapons attack, especially on Indian forces inside Pakistani territory, will make it difficult for India to justify a full-scale massive retaliation that the Indian doctrine suggests. But the Indian doctrine is also sufficiently flexible. Massive retaliation is one of the options it has in case of a nuclear attack. India can decide to use, for instance, another smaller nuclear warhead in retaliation or a limited nuclear strike. So, it doesn't mean the doctrine itself has to change in response to that. All the doctrine says as of now is, we will not be the first to attack and we will only retaliate. Our posture and doctrine are essentially retaliation only. We will not initiate.



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Belt and roadblocks

Given mounting criticism of BRI, will China incorporate best practices in the project?

YOGESH GUPTA

China's raging trade war with the U.S., mounting criticism of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and growing schism in its Politburo on handling these issues has compelled the Chinese leadership to review the initiative. The BRI was conceived as a response to the vast overcapacity in infrastructure-related industries due to credit-fuelled growth in China in 2008 following the global economic recession, when its exports started dwindling. In 2009, former Deputy Director of China's State Administration of Taxation, Xu Shanda, came up with a proposal called the Chinese Marshall Plan which suggested that China should utilise its vast foreign exchange reserves, expertise in building infrastructure, overcapacity in iron, cement, aluminium, glass, coal and shipbuilding industries and unemployed labour to meet the infrastructure demand in Southeast, Central Asia and Africa.

Announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013, the BRI consists of a belt of rail routes, highways, oil and gas pipelines and other infrastructure projects extending from Xian in Central China through Central Asia, Russia, West Asia and Europe. There is also a branch extending from Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar in Balochistan via Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). The 'road' segment comprises a network of ports and coastal infrastructure stretching from eastern China across Southeast Asia and South Asia, the Gulf, East Africa through the Mediterranean up to Rotterdam in Europe.

According to China, more than 120 countries have signed and joined the BRI. China's trade with these countries since 2013 has crossed more than \$5 trillion and investment has totalled about \$200 billion for 2,600 projects. In the first seven months of 2019, China's trade with BRI countries was 6% higher than the growth of its global trade.

Roadblocks

However, BRI has not succeeded in the full utilisation of overcapacity in infrastructure industries. China has been forced to close many companies. About one-third of its projects

are failing due to several anomalies. There is no open tendering, competitive bidding or practice of an independent pre-feasibility or environmental impact studies, as per global norms. Many projects suffer from lack of local inputs, protests on land procurement, pollution, performance delays, corruption, financial viability, unsustainable debt and low investment returns. The interest rates charged by China are high, upward of 3% on government loans and 17%-18% on commercial loans with sovereign guarantee of the local government. As many loans turn non-performing assets, China is becoming selective in giving new loans.

Some BRI projects do not make economic sense. For example, the cost of transportation by the 12,000 km-long Yiwu-London rail line will be twice more expensive than shipping. Similarly, the cost of supplying crude oil and gas from Gwadar port to Tianjin in northeastern China via the 7,000 km-long pipeline proposed by China will be \$10 per barrel costlier than ocean freight. Many countries such as the Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Malaysia have asked China to restructure or downsize the BRI projects. India has rightly decided not to participate in BRI over concerns relating to sovereignty (the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through PoK), lack of transparency, openness, financial sustainability, high interest and the 'tied' nature of these loans.

The real challenge

After a chorus of international criticism, the old swagger about BRI has faded. President Xi promised at the second Belt and Road forum in April that China would 'fine-tune' the BRI with open consultation, clean governance and green projects. The growth of BRI is down as China's investment in these projects in the first quarter of 2019 grew only by 4% compared to 22% in 2018. The real challenge is whether best practices can be incorporated in BRI or it will remain only a 'Chinese' scheme given that state-owned enterprises play the lead implementing role.

Yogesh Gupta is a former Ambassador



NOIEBOOK

Questioning an Academy Award winner's choices

No matter how famous the interviewee, difficult questions need to be asked

SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM

Interviewing celebrities can be tricky, especially if you have grown up seeing them or hearing them long before you decided to become a journalist.

I decided to become a journalist when I was very young, in Class 10. Years before that I had become a big fan of A.R. Rahman. My relatives recall how I sang and danced to 'Ottagathai Kattiko' (Gentleman) at a family wedding and my school friends still rag me about my rendition of 'Dandiya Aatamum Aada' (Kadhalar Dhinam).

All these memories came flooding back to me when I first interviewed Rahman more than a decade ago. I was working with another publication then. I had goosebumps during that interaction, but I'm not going to delve on that now.

After that interview, any time an opportunity to

meet the music composer presented itself I always grabbed it. It has now become a joke in feature journalism circles that if there is an event where Rahman is expected, chances are that he might not turn up but I surely will.

You might have guessed by now that I'm star-struck by him. And so an incident that took place a few years ago at a hotel certainly came as a surprise – to him, to those around him, and even to me. This was after the release of the songs of his Tamil movie *Mersal*. Post a promotional event, Rahman sat down for a few interviews, including one with me. After we exchanged pleasantries and were waiting for the place to be set up, I asked him, "Why did you sing 'Neethane' and not 'Aalaporaan Thamizhan' in *Mersal*?"

The public relations representative in the room froze. Others gave me a

piercing look: Was I, a journalist, questioning an Academy Award winner over a creative decision in a film starring Vijay?

From the corner of my eye, I sensed the collective gaze. I fumbled for words and hastily added, "I mean, it's a beautiful melody. But your voice would have worked for 'Aalaporaan'. It talks about the pride of being a Tamilian, and who better than you to sing that?"

Rahman merely smiled and mumbled something about how 'Aalaporaan' was set to a pitch that was too high for him.

Later, a popular singer who has sung for Rahman told me how glad he was that I had given the composer my frank opinion. "People close to him always say, 'Good song, Sir.' I'm glad you told him what you felt," he said.

I was happy to hear that. The real challenge for film and entertainment journal-

ists is not to write (I've spun 800-word stories from five-minute interviews, as have many of my colleagues) but to ignore the excited fan in us and let the questioning scribe take over during interviews.

Another time, I got an opportunity to interview actor Ajith. This was when the actor was still open to talking to the media. We were inside a restaurant at Sheraton Park (now called Crowne Plaza) in Chennai when I asked him, "Would you say that your choice of directors has been a little off in recent times?"

Ajith was taken aback for a bit, but nevertheless answered the question with sincerity.

These two incidents with celebrities have taught me one journalistic lesson that I always try to follow: difficult questions need to be asked, no matter how famous the person. And it is those answers that make the interview unique.

The Hindu.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO AUGUST 23, 1969

130 MPs want action against PM

The Group of Congress members of Parliament, who had yesterday [Aug 21, New Delhi] urged suspension of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and others for breach of party discipline, had another meeting today with added strength and set up a seven-man committee to personally contact Congress Working Committee members and plead in favour of strict disciplinary action. According to Mr. S. N. Misra, Deputy Leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party, who presided over the meeting, 130 M.P.s. were present today against 70 yesterday. The Maharashtra Congress M.P.s. did not take part in this move to-day. It is stated that several members questioned the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi and wanted the party President not to delay taking disciplinary action against Mrs. Gandhi, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed and Mr. Jagjivan Ram for working openly against the party candidate in the presidential poll. Mr. N. R. Munuswamy and Mr. T. V. Anandan, from Tamil Nadu, were among the fiercest critics of the Prime Minister.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO AUGUST 23, 1919.

Library Organisation in India.

Before considering how best to organise public libraries in India, it may be useful to glance at the state of affairs and what the Governments and the people have done in the progressive countries of the west in this matter. In the United Kingdom we can trace the desire of the people to have free public libraries among them on a large scale to the year 1850 when the Parliament was made to pass the first Library Act. Since then about 20 other Acts came into existence and at the present day the development of libraries is included in the general schemes for the advancement of education and is guided by the Act of 1902 by which local education boards are empowered to promote the general co-ordination of all forms of education including Libraries. The boroughs and parishes are authorised to collect from the rate-payers... on the rateable value of an administrative area – with power to fix a lower rate – for the purpose of maintaining free public libraries within the limits of their respective jurisdictions. The result is that almost every town and village has a free public library of its own for the use of its inhabitants. In addition to the municipal libraries, there are special acts of Parliament affecting the large number of British libraries which are not supported out of the rates.