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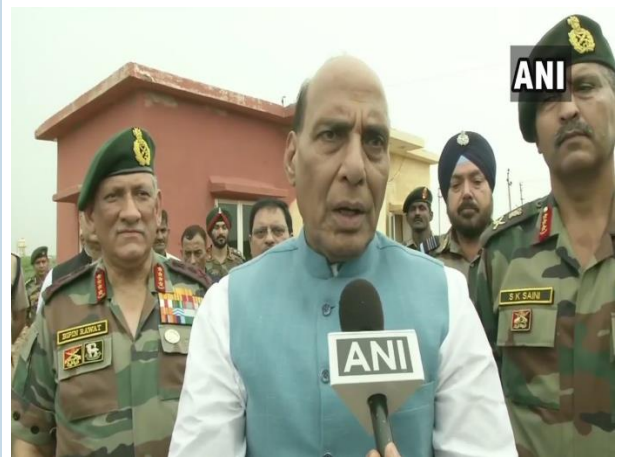
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Cover Photograph:

On August 16, 2019, while on a visit to Pokhran, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh suggested that India's No First Use Policy on nuclear weapons is not a binding commitment. Source: Twitter/ANI

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Redefining India's NFU Doctrine

by

Arun Sahgal

Introduction

The Indian Defence Minister's statement at Pokhran on August 16, 2019¹, the site of India's nuclear tests in May 1998, suggesting that India's No First Use (NFU) Nuclear Doctrine is not cast in stone and can be reviewed depending upon future circumstances, has set off a debate over both the need and the timing for such a review.



On August 16, 2019, while on a visit to Pokhran, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh suggested that India's No First Use Policy on nuclear weapons is not a binding commitment. Source: Twitter/ANI

Concern is being voiced over the need in the belief that India's declared nuclear doctrine has stood the test of time. There is also an attempt among sections of the commentariat who are prone to taking a jaundiced view of recent developments revoking the special status of Jammu & Kashmir to attribute

¹ Speaking at Pokhran, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated: "Till today, our nuclear policy is 'no first use'...What happens in future depends on the circumstances." In a subsequent tweet, the Minister reaffirmed this position: "Pokhran is the area which witnessed Atal Ji's firm resolve to make India a nuclear power and yet remain firmly committed to the doctrine of 'No First Use'. India has strictly adhered to this doctrine. What happens in future depends on the circumstances."

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's remarks to these developments, and then proceed to characterise these as a wholly uncalled for escalation, which is bound to further increase tensions between India and Pakistan.

Given this perspective, this policy brief discusses two related issues pertaining to the Minister's remarks. First, what do the remarks actually signify and whether this marks a shift from India's stated nuclear doctrine; and second, the likely cause of the remarks.

India's Nuclear Doctrine

Analysts conversant with issues related to strategic stability in South Asia would look upon the statement not so much as a deviation from the stated doctrine, but as a much needed clarification to our Western neighbour's attempts at sabre rattling about its nuclear option.

In so far as India's nuclear doctrine is concerned, it is based on the concept of "No First Use" (NFU) backed by a policy of maintaining a minimum credible deterrence capable of delivering assured massive retaliation against any nuclear attack. The above conceptualization is grounded on the fact that India looks upon its strategic capability as a political instrument and war-avoiding deterrent whose aim is to convince any potential aggressor that:

- a. Threat or use of nuclear weapons against India shall involve measures to counter the threat; and
- b. Any nuclear attack on India and its forces anywhere shall result in massive retaliation, inflicting unacceptable damage to the aggressor.

Flowing from the above, it is clear that the Indian doctrine is based on the concept of **deterrence by denial**, with the psychological onus of escalation on Pakistan. This implies that the adversary is put on notice that use of nuclear weapons in whatever form or manner will result in massive retaliation. The doctrine purposely leaves vague both the nature of retaliation and even what constitutes "massive".

In other words, the doctrinal rationale is to send a clear message to the Military-led Pakistani NCA (Nuclear Command Authority) to be assured that nuclear sabre rattling will result in the prospect of facing massive Indian retaliation. More importantly, it makes no distinction regarding the nature of nuclear weapons, be they tactical or strategic, leaving little chance of misperception/misunderstanding on the part of the adversary. It further implies that once nuclear deterrence breaks down, all bets are off.

Therefore, the core logic of the Indian doctrine lies in dissuading the potential use of nuclear weapons against India by adversaries.

Seen in the above context, what the Indian Defence Minister is trying to convey is that going down the path of nuclear brinkmanship, threats or posturing is dangerous and needlessly escalatory.

NFU Doctrine Redefined

The question then is that if these equations of nuclear deterrence are well understood, what has changed that has caused the Minister to make the remarks at Pokhran?

Conjecturally, it would appear that the Minister's response perhaps relates to some important lessons emerging from the recent India-Pakistan military standoff. The crisis appears to have created a perception among the Pakistani military establishment that in any limited conflict scenario, given the prevailing conventional military balance, Pakistan will be able to respond in kind to any Indian military escalation. Further, there is a growing belief that such a response will create a major dilemma for India, in terms of either to escalate its conventional response further or to defuse the situation. They further seem to believe that to retain the credibility of its "punitive response doctrine", India will be forced to escalate to a higher magnitude.

At this third level, Pakistani military planners are convinced that should the situation tend to become adverse, given Pakistan's "full spectrum nuclear capability" it will be able to deal with the situation by posturing over use of its battlefield nuclear weapons and stave-off existential military reversals by signalling early thresholds/redlines.

This concept of Pakistan's nuclear grand strategy is highlighted by the fact that during the recent Balakot crisis, Pakistan thought it fit to convene a meeting of its National Command Authority on February 27, 2019 (the second day of the crisis), with unmistakable signalling of its intent at nuclear posturing. It is important to note that its "nuclear war fighting doctrine" has provided the Pakistani military and leadership a misperceived notion of playing the game of brinkmanship through a posture of strategic ambiguity, accompanied by nuclear posturing.

Another consequence of the above ill-conceived thinking is signalled by Pakistan resorting to a change in its nuclear posture from recessed to deployment during the early part of a crisis, purportedly as part of prudent management and protection of assets from a decapitating strike. Such actions

are prone to misperception and miscalculation, leading to a heightened alert status.

It is in above perspective that there is a need to deconstruct the Indian Defence Minister's remarks on NFU. The Pakistani military establishment mistakenly believes that its build-up of battlefield nuclear weapons, acquisition of long-range vectors such as Shaheen 3 and pursuit of MIRV capabilities etc., has provided Pakistan with a viable "first and second strike capability". Pakistani nuclear theorists also believe that they can deal with any adverse conventional situation through the coercive blackmail of battlefield nuclear weapons. They appear to imagine that this will create a response dilemma for India, given the backdrop of an assured Pakistani second strike capability.

It is in this milieu that perhaps there is some revised thinking among India's policymakers that rather than remaining wedded to the purely countervalue, massive retaliation doctrine, a more flexible response option based on both counterforce and countervalue targeting will meet India's deterrence requirements better. This logic is prompted further by the vastly improved Indian ISR capabilities, providing Indian decision makers adequate warning about Pakistani moves or deployments of strategic weapons. In this backdrop, launch on warning or even a pre-emptive strike can be contemplated as part of the Indian NFU doctrine, bringing it closer to China's NFU doctrine which incorporates the nuance of massive retaliation on warning.

The changed nuance signalled by the Indian Defence Minister does not in any way undermine the sanctity and logic of India's NFU doctrine, but at the same time clearly conveys that India is fully prepared to deal with any manner of Pakistani nuclear brinkmanship or coercion.



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