

## **“India’s Nuclear Doctrine: The Way Forward”**

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses along with the Indian Pugwash Society organised a webinar on the theme, “India’s Nuclear Doctrine: The Way Forward.” The main speakers of the webinar were Prof. Bharat Karnad, Lt. Gen Balraj Singh Nagal, Prof Rajesh Rajagopalan and Dr. Rajiv Nayan.

The Discussions began with opening remarks by Amb Sujan Chinoy, Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and convenor of the Indian Pugwash Society.

The event was Chaired by Prof Amitabh Matto, he pointed out that it has been two decades since there has been a nuclear posture/doctrine review which was in 2003. He suggested the need to academically think through these issues and understand deeply India’s nuclear posture and the changes it may or may not need.

### **DG MP-IDSA**

He began his address by pointing out that older debates on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament continue to remain relevant for global peace, security and stability. This month marked the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the nuclear tests conducted in Pokhran. The then Vajpayee government’s bold decision sparked off a strong global reaction. This criticism was however misplaced because India has an unblemished record in non-proliferation, apart from strong advocacy of general and complete disarmament all along. India had participated in discussion on the test ban treaty in the 1950s which led to the partial test ban treaty in 1963. In fact, India had active debates in the 1960s that led to the NPT. However, when it became increasingly clear that it would be an unequal treaty, India took a principled position and remained non-signatory

By the 1970s, NAM and the dual nuclear threats that India faced on its northern and western borders had made it clear that India would have to fend for itself. In 1974, India went in for a peaceful nuclear explosion which was a technological demonstration of India’s capabilities. India was hobbled by sanctions, but largely due to its resilience and ability of its scientists made tremendous progress in the field of missile technology, starting with the Integrated Guided Missile Programme in the early 1980s.

When in 1974 India tested its nuclear capabilities, the world was remarkably different from that of the 1950s. By 1998, the world was once again in the throes of change. The last decade

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century commenced with the demise of the Soviet Union and end of Cold War, but by the time India was weaponised in 1998, the end of the unipolar decade of the US was already in sight.

By then China had conclusively overcome the fall-out of the Tiananmen crackdown. It was engaging the world and preparing to challenge US presence, power and influence and becoming more assertive, particularly on its periphery. Ironically, the US and China were seeking a G2 accommodation at that time, as evident in the Sino-US joint Communique issued during President Clinton's visit to Beijing in June 1998, within a month of India's nuclear explosions. The P5 Joint Communique of 4 June 1998, endorsed by UNSC Resolution 1172 was seeking to address the threat of a South Asian nuclear and missile arms race.

In 1999, the NSAB came up with a draft nuclear doctrine (DND). As a responsible nuclear weapon state, India has a nuclear doctrine that reflects on the basic philosophy and those of India. The doctrine addresses the need for the management of the country's security in a nuclearized environment but balances it with the long-cherished policy of promoting international peace and stability. India's draft nuclear doctrine of 1999 called for India's nuclear forces to be deployed on a triad of delivery vehicles of aircraft, mobile land-based missiles and sea-based assets that would be structured for punitive retaliation so as to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor.

In January 2003, the main markers of India's nuclear doctrine were summarised as follows

- 1 Building and maintaining credible minimum deterrence
- 2 A posture of "No First Use": 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 Nuclear retaliatory attacks can only be authorised by the civilian political leadership through the nuclear command authority.
- 5 Non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states.
- 6 However, in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.

7 A continuance of strict controls on export of nuclear and missile related materials and technologies, participation in the Fissile Material cut off treaty negotiations, and continued observance of the moratorium on nuclear tests.

8 Continued commitment to the goal of a nuclear weapon free world, through global, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament.

The world has changed again since then. Apart from the nuclear deal with the US India has harmonised its export control list and become a member of regimes such as the MTCR, Australian Group and the Wassenaar arrangement. The NSG still remains the holy grail, within the grasp, but for China's opposition.

Today the global economies are in recession as a result of Covid-19, Multilateralism and global institutions are in disarray. The need of the hour is global peace and stability, to ensure cooperation in the fight against the pandemic and work towards economic recovery. Building trust and confidence and reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in security doctrines is the best way forward. India has for long been pushing for adoption of resolutions at the UN for a Comprehensive Nuclear Weapons Convention, a convention on the prohibition of use of nuclear weapons and on reducing nuclear danger arising from accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons. These are still very relevant today in our pursuit of global nuclear disarmament.

As a responsible nuclear weapon state, India is committed to maintain credible minimum deterrence with the posture of no-first and non-use against non-nuclear weapons states. India is prepared to convert these undertakings into multilateral legal arrangements to be further negotiated in the conference on disarmament.

### **Speakers:**

#### **Prof Bharat Karnad**

He pointed out that a country cannot have deterrence or claim to have deterrence that is not realistic, one cannot begin to base deterrence on idealistic notions of how the international system is or how the opponent is likely to behave, one has to understand the ground realities and what the thinking is which is different from what the rhetoric is. The rhetoric might not reflect the actual deterrence substance or deterrence measures that a country has taken since the birth of the nuclear era. Giving his personal views, the speaker was sceptical towards India's nuclear doctrine policies and that India is into this moralistic, pacifistic notion of

multilateralism which has no relevance to the hard-military realities that deterrence is supposed to address. He points out that it is imperative to make it clear while making a deterrence strategy to not subscribe to not naive notions of how the world behaves, what nuclear weapons actually are, what their utility is and unfortunately that is not reflected in the nuclear rhetoric.

With respect to the credible minimum deterrence notions that the drafting committee the NSAB came up with in 1998 in our first submission the draft of the government, but the January 3, 2003 gazetted version which is supposed to be what we are supposed to go by has completely inverted the logic. We had built in the proportional, flexible response notion in section 4 of the draft doctrine and that was subverted in the sense by powers that be, who knew very little of deterrence because ultimately there'd be no military exchange. He pointed out that in case of India, the nuclear doctrine has to be directed at an adversary in the nuclear circumstance, and it was converted to massive retaliation which did not make sense, considering that the provocation was not just nuclear, but also any use of biological weapons and weapons of mass destruction as well. The speaker gives the example of the 1992 Surat plague, which was argued in the drafting committee as the perfect example of a biological and chemical attack. The reason given was because it was localised, it was never a strain that was never seen in the subcontinent before, and if that was the case, what could have India done, could they have nuclear bombed Karachi? He points out that there was a lack of understanding of the issues and debates that were being carried out, during the time the India nuclear doctrine was gazetted.

Mr. Bharat Karnad ponders over what has happened since 2003, the year of the NSAB conference, the speaker had predicted that in terms of more and more nations and the entire international system has reduced to the imperatives of the nation state. If the global system has reduced towards nation state and there is nothing that could be looked towards, in terms of rescue in times of extreme crisis then the country has to rely on it-self. He pointed out that our adversary is not Pakistan, even though that is what India has reduced itself to, it is China we have to have nuclear parity with China. China in its geostrategic position is opposed to America and we are building up to deal with America. So, India willy-nilly in a daisy chain of matters of deterrence whether we like it or not we began to develop a deterrence posture that deters China, but we instead get hung up on Pakistan and so on. On the front of Pakistan, the speaker clarified that any use of nuclear whether its tactical, 10 kiloton or 5 kilotons is strategic. Because the westerly wind that blows from Pakistan, will carry the nuclear debris along with the radiation to India, even if a bomb is dropped on the Pakistani territory the nuclear debris that rises up into the atmosphere will precipitate the nuclear radiated clouds over India and

there will be precipitation on Indian towns and border cities, that would be a strategic attack. Therefore, Prof Karnad pointed out that there is no such thing as tactical use on the subcontinent in the India Pakistan context.

The other aspect that the speaker pointed out was precisely the use of nuclear weapons in terms of dealing with the conventional military inferiority that India has and India is not in the position in the near future and in a very long time to begin to bridge that gap. This begs the question; how should the Chinese coercion be dealt with? The speaker suggested having a first use policy where it is imperative for India to get into a first use mode vis-à-vis China. And that harks back to the point of using atomic demolition munitions and placing them in the Himalayan passes to deter PLA. Aside from having the short range short fused nuclear missiles on the border to counter the Chinese placements of MRBMs on the Tibetan plateau. India needs to have a counter policy posture vis-à-vis China whether in Tibet or elsewhere. We cannot rely on SSBNs because it goes out of the proportionate punitive response notions. Atomic demolition munitions, forward deployed SRBMs on the Chinese front would at once adhere moreover with our notion of a passive, defensive reactive notion that we have why? The PLA would first have to enter Indian territory in force for the ADMs to be triggered and that is the first use notion. As far as the conventional military superiority of the military is concerned, India will have to become far more proactive and aggressive in saying “if the PLA come in at any great force and we are unable to use the ADMs and that doesn’t stop them.

The use of nuclear weapons to deter your adversary against a superior conventional military was used by China against America and is being used by Pakistan against us or by North Korea against the USA. Except North Koreans have the extraordinary advantage of threatening not necessarily the mainland (which they can now) they threaten Tokyo and that’s the kind of deterrence posture they have. India doesn’t have this, according to the speaker, whom do we threaten mulls the speaker China? This is where India really needs to begin to think realistically about what their options are and to begin configuring a force that is of some utility in a crisis.

### **Lt. Gen Nagal PVSM**

The world is churning and every country’s national security document talks of changes, threats or perceptions which may be inimical to others and thus India is no different. The world nuclear order is also unravelling in disarray and after the ABM treaty withdrawal and the INF treaty withdrawal there doesn’t appear any hope as far as the nuclear world order is concerned. The arms race has recommenced and China also happens to be part of that race as it looks at

America as its principal challenge. North Korea and Iran are possibly the next contenders in the nuclear race and therefore those issues also need to be looked at. Space and cyber wars are at a dimension, and therefore the advent of hypersonic weapons systems is adding instability and to the nuclear world order. Therefore, in this anarchic world that we are now part of there is no idealistic solution. Speaking of India's draft doctrine, the speaker points towards moralizing, where it tries to tell the world that it ought to be peaceful, that doesn't hold any value in the real world. Therefore, India needs to relook at the moral stand that it took during the build-up to the nuclear doctrine. It has not helped India's cause by being on the moral and therefore the speaker opined that there is a need to relook at India's nuclear doctrine substantially. National power and national interest are reigning supreme and therefore there is a need to relook at those aspects which determine India's nuclear policy. The speaker pointed to the futility of morality and ethics as we can see what has been done by the major powers. Therefore, idealism has no place as far as India is concerned.

He drew attention to the doctrines of the 4 major powers USA, UK France and Russia they all talk in terms of 1<sup>st</sup> use and ambiguity and therefore if one reads the NPR or the Strategic review of UK or if you look at Macron's speech or if you look at the Russian doctrine there is scope for ambiguity and there are clear directions that weapons will be used when the national interest is jeopardised or vital interests are threatened or the state is under threat.

Three major points which India needs to re-examine from the existing doctrine.

1 No first use which is linked to massive retaliation with unacceptable damage: In the draft doctrine India spoke of the right to self defence

2 Retaliation after 1<sup>st</sup> use and hence allowing your country to be destroyed.

3 The government of India who so ever is in power and designs the doctrine has no moral right to destroy the nation before retaliation (40.00-46)

Therefore, we need to abandon the nuclear no first use policy. We need to become ambiguous with all options of 1<sup>st</sup> use, retaliation 2<sup>nd</sup> uses all available. The speaker spoke of the significance of technology and the need for India to remain in the forefront of technology, whether it is nuclear weapons, delivery systems ballistic missile defence, it is space systems, hypersonic missiles or whatever that is emerging in cyber space and therefore India's nuclear doctrine needs to address the issue of technological advances and invest much more in that. Hence there is a need to change our doctrine to a policy of ambiguity also address the issue of

non-actors addressing your country with weapons of mass destruction and hold states which sponsor non state actors responsible. FMCT is a non-starter and presently it doesn't serve India's interests. NPT states, that is nuclear haves will not allow disarmament and therefore it is important to maintain that India will not sign an NPT and will remain a nuclear state.

### **Prof Rajesh Rajagopalan**

At the onset, he pointed out that there is no need to Change India's nuclear doctrine and much of the doctrine serves India well. He pointed out there is no contingency under which we can credibly threaten to use nuclear weapons first and it is important to reflect upon what those contingencies might be? He sighted an example where former defence minister Manohar Parrikar said "we should not bind ourselves but if we don't bind ourselves and NFU binds us what will an India that is not bound by NFU would behave?" What are the hypothetical or theoretical contingencies that will need India to use Nuclear weapons first? The speaker opined that he did not see any condition where India using the nuclear weapon first could be beneficial to India. To think of several contingencies, one being terrorism, and he pondered over how was the NFU beneficial in dealing with the attacks in Mumbai or Parliament and points out that there was no role of nuclear weapons during those types of contingencies. 2<sup>nd</sup> contingency conventional defeat in war with China (worst military defeat 1962) or Pakistan. If we had nuclear weapons at that time how would we have possibly used it to avoid defeat using nuclear weapons in a territorial conflict that doesn't threaten India's survival is absurd. The speaker pointed out that every nuclear state in the international system has lost a war and didn't think to use nuclear weapons to avoid that defeat. The idea that India will use nuclear weapons to avoid a conventional defeat on the border issue less than credible. Even if India were to lose Kashmir to a Pakistan invasion or Arunachal to a Chinese invasion the speaker doubts that India would use nuclear weapons. The possibility about NFU preventing from adopting a posture like launch on warning or launch under attack and both the responses needs to be looked because launch under attack has several technical problems, India and Pakistan are 10 minutes apart there is no way where we will be able to detect verify, inform the political high-command for them to order a retaliation and for the retaliation to be carried out in under 10 minutes and slightly longer, 15 or 20 minutes in case of Chinese missiles in Tibet. The US and USSR had those systems in place with the distance being slightly longer, 35-40 minutes, but even that was highly unlikely. So, the idea that India could have a launch under attack posture, would be possible if missile launching authority was given to early battle commanders or to automate the process and take humans entirely out of the loop, which is impossible, no county has done

that. Launch on warning has a similar problem, because no political leader will trust intelligence enough to start a nuclear war and even if we say that china and Pakistan are planning a nuclear attack there is no way that we will know with certainty that they would start a nuclear war also adding that before the launch they could change their mind. Hence the idea that India will launch on warning too is not very credible. And if we did have such warnings about potential attack the simpler solution would be to broadcast that warning, and if you do this we will have to retaliate and we are ready to retaliate. The speakers opine that it will help in stop any such planning instead of adopting something like launch on warning.

The final contingency to prevent successful 1<sup>st</sup> strike against India is another possibility where there is a need to give up NFU and have a 1<sup>st</sup> use if we feel we are threatened by a successful first strike but neither Pakistan nor China are capable of completely disarming 1<sup>st</sup> strike, no country is because it can never be certain that a country is hiding certain weapons which they cannot find and which we can retaliate. If India wants to increase that uncertainty, India should make efforts to hide their arsenals better and do disinformation about the size of India's arsenals, increasing their nuclear submarine force. Finally, a 1<sup>st</sup> use doctrine would also require a counter force, and that would require at least a 3:1 advantage against Pakistan and china. Which would mean India is building up a couple of 1000s warheads which they would try to match and this would simply not work.

Furthermore, there are also advantages to NFU in terms of tighter political command and control of weapons, lesser stress on intelligence and early warning requirements, there won't be a need to keep all nuclear weapons on alert for the chance of accidents thefts etc. so all the disadvantages of a non NFU and all the advantages of the NFU posture and hence he concluded that there is no need to change India's nuclear doctrine. He suggested that periodic reviews may be necessary and think about the fore structure we already have, move towards ssbns instead of land-based missiles but anything beyond this is not needed. Nuclear weapons play a very limited role in deterrence and in military affairs and they can deter existential threats and they can be either nuclear attacks

### **Dr. Rajiv Nayan**

He started off by bringing about three points, what is the doctrine, the evaluation of the doctrine and the way ahead? The NFU doctrine was officially released on January 4, 2003 before that but some of the elements of the doctrine were out in open with former PM Vajpayee who highlighted some elements which would be a part of India's nuclear doctrine. It was well known



and well discussed and in a unique democratic way, which can be called public-private partnership. A group of experts too were appointed along with the National Security Advisory Board but that was a draft committee report, which the speaker disagrees with calling the draft committee report a non- governmental governmental body which the government was free to adopt or not adopt but that was the formal report of the national security advisory body and it to a great extent shaped the debate of the country and the government was influenced by the content of the report according to Nayan. What we find in the doctrine is some of the strategic simplification, the simplification being that deterrence is working, in 1940, when deterrence was adopted it was only based on rules there was no empirical evidence but by the time India adopted or formulated at that movement deterrence got some empirical evidence and some functioning about the rules that shape the deterrence. 2<sup>nd</sup> strategic simplification which India's nuclear doctrine makers made was to declare that two nuclear weapons countries could be rational actors.

It's not the assumption on the basis of which we push our deterrence to fight a war, so that was very interesting. He invoked Nye and spoke of the concept of nuclear learning as propounded by Joseph Nye, that nuclear learning also shaped India's thinking. India did not borrow directly from American thinking and American doctrine, we relied to a great extent on Chinese thinking. No first use, no using against non-nuclear countries these are some of the features and the most important point of the doctrine was establishing political supremacy, civilian political leadership to the nuclear command authority that no one can dictate, political class will formulate and the political decision making power will remain with the civilian political class.

At which point he begs the question, if the nuclear doctrine was effective in India. This doctrine has had several successes;

1 It assuaged the feelings of the international community, since they were hostile after India had conducted their nuclear weapons test. This addressed the international public opinion making and conveyed the message that India is not an aggressor.

2 We should not discount this doctrine when we signed the nuclear deal and because of India's non offensive nature of nuclear doctrine, the international community agreed to mainstream India as a non-proliferation agreement even if India is not a member of NPT, India has not signed it and is not going to sign it in the broad non-proliferation network India can be

accommodated and India can be given many concessions which has been denied to it because it was not a signatory. India's nuclear doctrine played a very important role to that.

3. Legitimacy of India's nuclear weapons the world has started accepting and is ready to accommodate India as a nuclear weapon country albeit they don't confer legally on the status. Somehow in reality they have come to terms that India is a responsible nuclear missile country not only to the international community, very interestingly when the Doklam standoff took place, and as Pakistan just keeps using the 'nuclear weapons threat' that they would not hesitate to use the nuclear weapon on India. This is despite having the general impression that India is conventionally inferior to China, Pakistan never uttered a single word they will use nuclear weapons when it is defeated. So, Pakistan exercised an utmost restraint. This is the big point of India's nuclear doctrine, India's thinking or India's approach to nuclear weapons.

### Challenges

The speaker further stated the following challenges faced by India's nuclear doctrine a major threat being terrorism, terrorism was shielded by a nuclear weapon country and two nuclear weapon countries should not fight a war. It's not the time for shielding terrorism if you make any conventional intervention against nuclear weapon and it can be used against you. So that was the impression Pakistan was giving and somehow, India was struggling to over-come, struggling to this rogue country and where India's nuclear doctrine appeared to be slightly ineffective. Why was it feeling ineffective? Because of 2-3 reasons (1) India over emphasized the role of nuclear weapons as a political weapon, doing so India took away the credibility of its deterrence because you are not going to use it. Impression that India won't be using the weapon and that impression was wrongly given (2) Rigidity in Indian strategic community in general and the policy making community in particular that we should not review then massive retaliation of US was reviewed within a decade. So why are we so hesitant to review the country? Was disturbed with the notion of reviewing even one paragraph, this was a very nice message we were giving to Pakistan that keep doing whatever you are doing. India is a weak country and we are not ready to do anything substantial. (3) Over-emphasis on foreign policy, the international community should not feel bad it should not consider India as an aggressor.

The speaker says he doesn't adhere to the point that NFU should be changed, and the Balakot strike has settled that debate, that if you have the political will then no matter how many pronouncements Pakistan makes, India can call that bluff. So PM Modi should be congratulated for calling the Pakistani bluff.

While using language like NFU, First Strike India somehow confused itself and we have managed to communicate to the world that we are non-aggressor at the same time we also confused ourselves. The speaker suggested in the end that India should have its own coinage and own terminology, we need clarity on what we want to convey. If we have our own language then it becomes clearer on what we are saying as we can interpret it, we can customize it and that should be our objective.

### **Comments by the Chair Prof. Amitabh Mattu**

The chair thanked all the speakers for a stimulating discussion on India's Nuclear Policy and the way forward. Prof. Mattu then pointed out, one of the major challenges is the lack of capacity within the academic, scientific community to genuinely have an informed review on India's Nuclear policy and other aspects of security, for instance in the US the Jason committee was functional till the Trump administration disbanded it, the committee consisted of the best scientists independently reviewing aspects of security. After 20 years of weaponization, India still is striving for that capacity. He also recommended that the academic and strategic community's coordinated work together will help India to have an informed review of many of the security issues which have been raised. Secondly, the debate on nuclear deterrent which could address a threat from all directions to a minimalist credible nuclear doctrine based on NFU was also mentioned by Prof. Mattu.

### **Following Questions were raised from the audience after the discussion:**

- While getting into a first use posture besides the technical structural aspects and trigger status, additionally the economic costs especially after covid19, would India be able to afford that or will the NFU serve the purpose of nuclear deterrence.
- Given the current changed scenario, the issue of potential biological agents being used and discussions on origins of the virus whether the whole discourse on nuclear deterrence is rendered irrelevant or not?
- In case of conventional attacks on India's Nuclear Forces, what would be recommended about the nature of the attack?

### **Concluding points by Pugwash Team**

Any crisis involving nuclear weapons would be a humanitarian disaster beyond imagination. The raging pandemic has provided us with some sense of what such disasters entail in terms of lives lost, economies wrecked, livelihoods destroyed and societies devastated. A nuclear

disaster would additionally involve property losses in blasts and fires, related ecological consequences, and long-lasting radioactivity effects. India's nuclear strategy anchored in minimalism and no first use holds useful lessons for all.

Indian Nuclear Doctrine in 1999 broadly outlined India's nuclear no-first-use policy and defensive posture of "credible minimum nuclear deterrence. The draft nuclear doctrine (DND) exclaims: "In the absence of global nuclear disarmament, India's strategic interests require effective, credible nuclear deterrence and adequate retaliatory capability. This is consistent with the UN Charter, which sanctions the right of self-defence". The basic essence of India's nuclear posture is that of a peace-loving country which has a desire to defend itself against all possible threats.

The need for a nuclear-doctrine review conference, lies simply in the fact that India faces a dyad of nuclear threat, of very different natures. Will a doctrine be potent if it equates with only one of the nuclear rivals, and creates a vacuum for the other to exploit? Pakistan is seen to have benefited from the resultant asymmetry by running a prolonged low-intensity conflict (LIC) against India, and consistently managing to deny the space for an Indian response by threatening to escalate to nuclear use. India's nuclear capability was met with suspicion and reluctance, however it managed to redeem its nuclear stand by proving that it is a responsible nuclear power.

A combination of factors, like global nuclear politics, the volatile security environment, and a perceived shift towards a realist grand strategy, prompted this nuclearization path providing for a flexible application of postures and doctrine. India is visibly inching towards credible retaliatory capabilities for both China & Pakistan but still remains short of establishing what could amount to credible minimum deterrence, owing to the sustained push and pulls from a dynamic and ever-changing strategic environment. India's doctrine, even when being defensive in posture, leaves scope for scepticism on the scale of capabilities that are achievable.