



**Islamabad  
Policy Institute**

*Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development*

# **India's No First Use Dilemma: An Emerging Nuclear Threat**

**ASMA KHALID**

Senior Lecturer, Institute of Policy Studies, University of Islamabad

5<sup>th</sup> Floor Ali Plaza, Jinnah Avenue,  
Blue Area, Islamabad.  
Email: [info@ipik.org](mailto:info@ipik.org)  
Tel No: 051-8444830  
P.O.Box 3393  
GPO Islamabad

# **India's No First Use Dilemma: An Emerging Nuclear Threat**

**Asma Khalid**

**August 27, 2019**

**Islamabad Policy Institute, Pakistan**

South Asia continues to be a volatile theater of an active conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir dispute. India's recent decision to revoke Article 370 of its Constitution and absorb Occupied Kashmir region into Indian Union has heightened tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. Amid escalation of military exchanges along the Line of Control (LoC) and upping of rhetoric against each other, India has signaled a dramatic shift in its nuclear-weapons use policy.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, strategic stability has been further destabilized in a region already fraught with tensions.

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh renewed an old debate by indicating the possibility of a review of "no first use policy" (NFU) on nuclear weapons, ambiguously stating that 'future circumstances' would direct the 'strategic policy change'.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Singh has joined a growing chorus of Indian policy-makers, who have made statements over the years hinting at a probable change in NFU pledge.

The current ruling party, BJP had hinted at review of NFU policy in its 2014 election manifesto.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, former Indian national security advisor and a former commander of strategic forces have written about possible scenarios under which India can contemplate first use of nuclear weapons against imminent threat from a nuclear-armed adversary. It undoubtedly pointed towards an erosion of NFU principle of India's nuclear doctrine, which had already been watered down over the years since its first announcement in 1999. For instance two clauses pertaining to a prospective nuclear response to any large scale attack on India or its interests anywhere in the world and strikes by chemical and biological weapons made the "no-first-use" policy ineffective.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, assertions by Indian National Security officials pointing towards redefinition of NFU as no-first use against non-nuclear weapons states and that

---

<sup>1</sup> "India's 'irresponsible' hint at nuclear policy change deplored", Dawn, August 17, 2019, [https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=17\\_08\\_2019\\_014\\_005](https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=17_08_2019_014_005).

<sup>2</sup> "Rajnath Singh Hints At 'No First Use' Policy Change Amid Tension With Pak," NDTV, August 16, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/rajnath-singh-says-india-has-been-firm-on-nuclear-no-first-use-policy-what-happens-in-future-depends-2085915>.

<sup>3</sup> "Indian election alarm as BJP raises prospect of nuclear weapons rethink", *The Guardian*, April 07, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/07/indian-election-bjp-manifesto-nuclear-weapons>.

<sup>4</sup> Luk, Umar Hayat. "Strategic Ambiguities in Indian Nuclear Doctrine Implications for Pakistan's Security." *Policy Perspectives: The Journal of the Institute of Policy Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016): 5-23.

irrespective of scale of nuclear attack ( a reference to tactical weapons developed by Pakistan), India would respond massively,<sup>5</sup> meant that NFU policy had ended, if there was ever one.

Pakistan, the primary adversary of India, has, therefore, never believed in Indian's NFU. It was not surprising when Pakistan's Foreign Minister didn't give credence to Indian Defence Minister's statement, stating that "India's NFU commitment is non-verifiable and cannot be taken on face value, particularly when developments of offensive capabilities and force postures belie such claims."<sup>6</sup>

Although Indians are trying to maintain ambiguity in their deterrence posture against Pakistan by making vague statements like the one made by Defense Minister Singh, but it denotes Delhi's inclination towards exploring possibilities for undertaking 'pre-emptive nuclear strike' against an adversary like Pakistan.

This gradual doctrinal shift is coming alongside modernization of its conventional and nuclear forces with the help of the Western countries. One of the underlying objectives of the modernization, particularly that of the Strategic forces, was to build the requisite suite of capabilities to undertake a pre-emptive strike. Otherwise, there was a clear mismatch between the trends in missile development and declared nuclear doctrine.

India's current strategy, therefore, is to create doubts and complexities in threat perception of Pakistan; accelerate enhancement of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities for attaining higher level of readiness for undertaking a pre-emptive counterforce attack; and through ambiguity over NFU posture keep presenting itself as a "responsible non-NPT" nuclear weapon state to gain access to various nuclear related technologies through membership of various export control regimes, and for entering into bilateral agreements for nuclear trade.

Meanwhile, in the context of on-going crisis, comments by Indian Defence Minister highlighted the nuclear dimension of the India-Pakistan conflict. Pakistani PM Imran Khan too has on multiple occasions warned of specter of a nuclear conflict if war breaks out between India

---

<sup>5</sup> Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* ( Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> "India's statement regarding 'no first use' policy on nuclear weapons is irresponsible: foreign minister", *Dawn*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1499826>.

and Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> But, what PM Khan has been saying is a caution against treading towards a conflict, but the manner and tone of Indian signaling has complicated the regional security environment for Pakistan. Islamabad, already under pressure to respond to recent moves by India in Kashmir, now has to factor-in the impact on nuclear stability in South Asia. New Delhi's approach appears to be guided towards dissuading Islamabad from pursuing a military response to current Kashmir crisis by suggesting that it won't refrain from resorting to nuclear use if a war breaks out, thus, Pakistan should weigh costs for any military conflagration carefully.

Yet, for Pakistan the question remains: how can it respond to India's growing offensive capabilities and nuclear brinkmanship? Regional strategic dynamics have in the past compelled Pakistan to stabilize the deterrence equilibrium after India's aggressive posture undermined deterrence stability. Pakistan can, therefore, formulate a two pronged strategy: For the long term, Pakistan needs to focus on maintaining the deterrence stability, enhancing its offense/defence capabilities and modernizing its strategic forces, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In the short-to-medium term, Pakistan can undertake modernization of its conventional capabilities, including enhancing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities to be able to detect Indian preparation for undertaking a pre-emptive strike. The key goal should, however, be deployment of a credible nuclear deterrent at sea as a second-strike capability. This will augment strategic balance and enhance strategic stability.

In the ongoing crisis, introduction of nuclear dimensions has underscored for Pakistan the need to boost its deterrent capabilities by undertaking test-flights of various ballistic and cruise missiles, both at surface and under-sea. This will signal to India that while Pakistan is pursuing path of peace, it remains ready to respond with all options at its disposal for any miscalculation by India.

**About Authors:** *Asma Khalid is a Senior Research Officer at Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI). She can be reached at asma.khalid@ipik.org or Twitter @AsmaKhalid\_11*

---

<sup>7</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, "World must wake up to India's nuke threat, says PM," *Dawn*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1500350>.