



Undermining Deterrence? The Non State Actors and India's Nuclear Doctrine

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The international security environment, characterized by the horizontal and vertical proliferation of nuclear weapons and technology holds manifold implications for India. In fact, it is the emergence of offensive nuclear attitudes of other states reflected in their doctrines which are open to the first use of nuclear weapons and even towards use against non-nuclear weapon states, which galvanized Indian efforts towards a military nuclear programme. The May 1998 tests gave to India an unalterable new identity - of a de facto nuclear weapons state - for which India sought international diplomatic recognition.

A doctrine which would justify India's nuclear status and policies was an important step in this direction. Besides, the doctrine was to be designed in such a way as to allay apprehensions which the international community had on India's (lack of) definable strategic objectives behind the nuclear tests (Chari, 2000: 125-135). The Indian Nuclear Doctrine spells out the principles and approach to deter adversaries who threaten India's sovereignty and existence.

The doctrine, taken in its entirety, conforms to the state-centric premises of nuclear deterrence. The principles of credible minimum deterrence, no first use and second strike capability are at the heart of the doctrine; they preclude rationality of actors and mutuality of deterrence. The nuclear doctrine's operational triad and its command and control structures too are aimed at the state-centric premises of nuclear deterrence. The core of the operational aspect deals with the ways in which an adversarial 'state' can be deterred. But interestingly, as is worded in the doctrine, India's nuclear weapons seek to deter 'the use or threat

to use of nuclear weapons by any State or entity against India and its forces' (2.4 Draft Doctrine) (*italics added for emphasis*). There is a categorical refusal to threaten non-nuclear weapons states with retaliation using nuclear weapons on the part of India. However, the doctrine remains silent on question of 'entities' which it has subtly included within its ambit. In the absence of a definition of what 'entities' pertain to, the doctrine poses difficulties to the operationalisation of the deterrent against these entities. The problem here is two-fold.

First, both the conceptual and contextual frameworks of nuclear deterrence are premised on the Cold War dynamics, one with which the Indian scenario bears neither similarity nor utility. The concept and its framework does not factor in the growing role of actors outside the state forces in the international military and security system. For India, the idea of 'threat' does not emanate just from adversarial state actors, but also from the tactical use of non-state actors against India to further the adversaries' overall strategy (Sinha, 2011).

Thus, it becomes imperative to emphasise that non-state actors like terror groups are not threats that can be dealt in isolation from those emanating from other states. The nexus between the two is what poses a great existential threat for India. Second, if the previous point is indeed true, the implication on India's deterrence in this scenario needs to be closely examined. As a concept, 'nuclear deterrence' is equipped to deter states, not non-state actors. However, for India, non-state actors have proved to be threats which cannot be ignored. Moreover, this threat is not something

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which has manifested itself recently.

I NUCLEAR DETERRENCE & THE NON STATE ACTORS

Terrorism has been a stark reality for the Indian state, much before it found its place in the international security lexicon post-9/11. In fact, for India, it is one whose roots can be traced back to the historical formation of the Indian state in 1947.

The 1947 partition has left a legacy of clashing identities which spill across territorial borders as well as unresolved issues with regard to territory (Ollapally, 2008). Given the colonial legacy which ran a knife across pre-1947 India, preserving its territorial integrity and protecting its sovereignty has become the overarching priority for India ever since. Moreover, this is where India, since 1947, has found itself threatened the most. The October 1947 tribal raiders' attempt to forcefully annex Kashmir with Pakistan is a case to this point.

More importantly, even though India has proven its conventional superiority twice, in 1965 and 1971, this has not deterred sub-conventional attacks. In fact, statistics prove that there has been an upsurge in terrorist attacks post-1998 (Global Terrorism Database, 2011). The nature of threats from violent non-state actors does not end at that. The dimension of nuclear terrorism is now intricately interwoven in the nuclear safety and security scenario of the world, and particularly that of South Asia. Pakistan poses a two-fold threat – first, the nuclear security measures in Pakistan could be so inadequate that they could be compromised by attacks from terrorist groups (Gregory, 2011) and second, elements in Pakistan's military and security establishments are strongly suspect of nuclear proliferation (passing on nuclear technological know-how and materials) to proxy actors (Chasdi, 2012). These proxy actors have an agenda of their own, besides promoting the 'national interests'.

The threat from adversarial nuclear states which work in tandem with non-state actors as their

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strategic assets is overwhelming. The question which then follows is why India has missed out on this significant nexus while designing its doctrine on nuclear deterrence? Further, if nuclear deterrence as adopted universally by nuclear weapons states cannot cope with realities which differ from those that operated during the Cold War era, would the incorporation of strategies of nuclear deterrence against non state actors work? This also leads us to question the ends and means through which India visualises its nuclear deterrence to be effective.

India and Nuclear Deterrence: The Ends and Means Debate

As mentioned above nuclear deterrence for India hinges primarily on deterring nuclear states as opposed to non-state actors (even if they do find a fleeting mention in the Indian Nuclear Doctrine). This is not surprising as India is accosted by two nuclear neighbours with whom it has previously fought wars and still has unresolved territorial disputes. The chain of threats and bargains, deterrence and dissuasion, denial and compellence form a cyclical equation. But, is it time to discard this outdated framework of deterrence strategy and develop a new framework which serves not only India's ends but also lays down sufficient means to achieve them? In the context of nuclear deterrence it becomes imperative to point out that only threats which impinge on India's territorial sovereignty and integrity pertain to the scope of the discussion. The attempt here is not to dismiss other threats from non-state actors which undermine the Indian state (for all sub-conventional attacks encroach on India's sovereignty) but rather to remain focussed on the issue at hand. The issues that are important to this discussion are briefly enumerated below.

Home-grown non-state actors operating on the Indian soil: Secessionist movements are not new threats for India. In fact the Indian government has been successful in combating only one such attempt (the Khalistan movement) in the recent times. The situation pertaining to such movements is rife not only in Jammu and Kashmir but also the North Eastern regions of India. Would it be --- to ask whether India could also target its nuclear deterrent against such non-state actors operating on its soil?

Non-state actors backed by an adversarial state: Various reports show that many an attempt which threatens India's territorial sovereignty and integrity is covertly and overtly supported by other states. The question to be addressed here is whether India can deter states and non-state actors linked by way of such activities using

nuclear weapons. This question makes inroads into whether the policy of No First Use can be effectively modified to include the threat of tactical use of nuclear weapons against external training camps.

Non-state actors which are transnational in character and pertain to regions rather than particular states: The problem in this case is evident. Nuclear deterrence relies on the clear and categorical identification of the adversary. In this case, identification proves to be a major setback. In fact, the idea of nuclear deterrence in this case would essentially involve an element of coercive diplomacy as states here cannot be held responsible for harbouring these groups. One which India would be reluctant to take as it would impinge on someone else's sovereignty.

Non-state actors which succeed in acquiring or inventing nuclear weapons (however rudimentary they may be): The current trend in proliferation and the often stated intent of many terrorist organisations to acquire nuclear technology, weapons, or even invent RDDs are cases to this point. What if a non-state actor threatens to use these devices against India? How will India respond?

This perhaps is the most contested point. Indeed an even challenging aspect in the event that India decides to evolve an effective nuclear deterrence policy against the threats mentioned above, is determining and defining the threshold which will act as a tipping point against which nuclear weapons can be used to deter non-state actors. One pertinent dilemma is whether radiological weapons should be considered as Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) for purposes of the nuclear doctrine? The threats, issues and questions touched upon here highlight that India vehemently argues against any attempt that would endanger its security and sovereignty but falls short of addressing pressing issues that dilute its nuclear deterrence. Therefore on closer examination, there appears to be a disconnect between the ends which India envisages its nuclear weapons to facilitate and the means by which it deals to persistent realities. In addition to the threats, issues and questions (which feed into the ends and means debate) listed above, it is important to outline how non-state actors undermine India's nuclear deterrence.

II UNDERMINING DETERRENCE

The Indian Nuclear Doctrine rests on three pillars: credible minimum deterrence, civilian command

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and control and no first use (Subrahmanyam, 1999). It is important to demonstrate how non-state actors impinge on the pillars of India's nuclear doctrine.

In the Indian context, the idea of credible minimum deterrence which combines the credibility of India's nuclear threat along with its capability to pull off a retaliatory nuclear strike that promises assured destruction falls short in face of sub-conventional threats for three major reasons.

First, non-state actors cannot be deterred because they are free of obligations that come with the legitimacy of being recognised players in the international system (Schwartz and Kink, 2010: 57), thereby making them less prone to bargaining strategies hinged on nuclear weapons. Second, they cannot be identified territorially, thus the idea of retaliatory attack gives way, one which forms the base of the Indian nuclear doctrine. Moreover, the ambiguities under which non-state actors hide make them invulnerable to the credibility of retaliatory measures thus purging the very ardour of deterrence as a strategy (Stone, 2010: 269). Third, as these non-state actors do not share the same value-systems and world-views as the Indian state (Lowther, 2010: 4) the whole process of rational calculations which is imperative to influence and deter adversaries is diluted.

The No First Use (NFU) of nuclear weapons is the second pillar of the Indian nuclear doctrine which is challenged by the non-state actors. Assuming that a nuclear attack has been initiated by a non-state actor on India's territory, where would be the destination/ target of a retaliatory Indian strike? Any retaliation on foreign territory using nuclear weapons would be a first use by India against that country. The 2003 CCS review of India's nuclear doctrine complicates this situation further. It pits India's nuclear weapons use in retaliation to not

only a nuclear attack, but even against attacks using other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), namely chemical and biological weapons. The use of the outlawed chemical and biological weapons would be made either by a state risking violation of international law or by non-state actors who are outside the jurisdiction of those laws. Here, the term 'weapons of mass destruction' poses problems – should radiological weapons be considered as WMDs? It can be argued that radiological terrorism constitutes an obviously grave threat to a country like India, given the ease of building a dirty bomb (radiological dispersal device) or an improvised explosive device. Some radioactivity dispersing devices with high yields and more effective radioisotopes could also change the weapon into a nuclear variant (Kulkarni 2012). How the Indian nuclear deterrent could deal with such complexities remains unexplained.

It is clear that references like 'entities' or 'retaliation against chemical and biological weapons' take stock of threats from outside the spectrum of state adversaries. However, such subtle hints do more to distort the nature of India's nuclear deterrent rather than to strengthen its ambiguity. In India, there is strong resistance to consider moves towards revising the Indian nuclear policies, and such ideas invoke dramatic reactions because they are considered to compromise ambiguity – the sacred stone on which the Indian nuclear doctrine rests. This has clearly resulted in a failure to acknowledge that threats to India from non-state actors have undermined its nuclear deterrence.

If India's nuclear weapons-related policies and doctrine are to be revisited and revised at all, an apposite starting point would be to generate procedural clarity on the elements that make the policies and doctrines. Two of these elements, relevant to this essay, can be easily identified – non-state actors and weapons of mass destruction. These terms do not have universally accepted standard definitions and therefore leave ample scope for misrepresentation. It also leaves space for interpretation; which could be used to arrive at a lexicon of technical-military terminologies. This would ensure that domestically there is uniformity of definitions across military doctrines and internationally there is less scope for misread. While mutual deterrence strategies cannot work against independent non-state

actors, they can be effective against quasi-state or sub-state actors if the state/ states backing such actors are publicly identified.

Such conceptual and procedural clarity will encourage critical debate on policies like 'massive nuclear retaliation against WMD attacks' and their implications.

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