Should India give up its NFU Doctrine?

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A very interesting discourse has been generated on Indian No First Use (NFU) by Suba Chandran (Click here for the Article) and Ahmed Ali (Click here for the Article) on IPCS website questioning whether to do away with NFU or retain it, respectively.

To analyze the NFU as enshrined in Indian nuclear doctrine is not an easy task for a Pakistani academic. This article attempts to provide a third alternative, into the fray of two opposing Indian views. At the outset my first judgment that Indian rejection or retention of NFU option has no bearing on Pakistan's strategic calculus. NFU is a theoretical construct. It is a declaratory pledge by nuclear states which does not have any binding legitimacy especially in the time of crisis. Pakistan and India have already gone through a series of crises which have been mitigated primarily because of international mediation at critical times, during the crises.

Despite the presence of a highly credible deterrence regime, both states have not been deterred by crisis escalation. In particular, the Indian Cold Start doctrine is itself an escalatory step in the same direction whereby the Indian dream of teaching Pakistan a lesson by initiating a conventional attack and limiting a conventional response by Pakistan on its home ground, is independent of its NFU posture.

The reasons for which India should retain its NFU have been clearly cited by Ahmed Ali in his article. It is difficult to accept his argument that India is a 'reluctant' nuclear weapons state, which is an argument more applicable to Pakistan. Even if we do accept India's 'reluctant' entry into the nuclear club, it neither justifies nor explains its 'defensive' posture entwined with its NFU pledge. If India believes it does not need nuclear weapons for war fighting and that it has conventional solutions at hand for both Pakistan and China as argued by Ahmed Ali, then a superficial retention of NFU is meaningless without any seriousness towards nuclear disarmament. At the international level, India is only seen making rhetorical noises about disarmament without displaying any concrete steps towards its achievement. It however, makes sense to retain NFU for political reasons as it hedges India's global nuclear ambitions and generates a false hope about strategic stability in South Asia. But any serious reader of this subject will understand that Indian NFU does not, in any way, shape or form contribute to the regional strategic stability, which is a combination of deterrence stability and crisis stability between Pakistan-India and India-China.

The arguments against NFU presented by Suba Chandran proposing that India gives up its NFU, are realistic but warrant serious analysis. According to him, NFU limits India’s nuclear ambitions, freezes its deterrence at minimum levels and leaves it vulnerable for absorbing the first strike. But if one was to rethink Indian options, given that these dysfunctions exist, it will not be favorable for India to revise its NFU status. If, India is a responsible nuclear state, it should refrain from declarations of discarding NFU. Or else it risks being seen as a revisionist power rather than a status quo which is an oft-argued position. But then an argument can also be made that India is already working on achieving deterrence levels beyond minimum and the ranges of its missiles, e.g. 5000 km Agni V, suggest that the ambitions are well beyond Pakistan. Therefore, any increase in Indian missile inventory, its deterrence raised to levels beyond minimum, or changing its No First Use to First Use, is of no significance to Pakistan where its nuclear posturing vis-a-vis India is concerned since all projections have already been accounted for.

Furthermore, does size really matter? Take the worst case scenario. Will the size of India’s nuclear arsenal at maximum numbers for example, provide ‘credible’ deterrence against first strike launched at India by either Pakistan or China, or both?

Hypothetically speaking, if a strike is launched at India by Pakistan or China, can large numbers of nuclear weapons, save India from two parallel first strikes? Agreed that such a scenario is farfetched, it is not entirely unthinkable. In order for
this to happen, India would really need to do something mindless like thinking of a pre-emptive attack on Pakistan (the only reason for which discarding NFU makes sense) and spooking China in the process, to warrant such a response from both. Since nothing is static in international politics, not even status quo, therefore, India should think twice about the signals it gives to its regional nuclear neighbors if it considers First Use instead of the current NFU doctrine.

Or, does a discourse on Indian NFU option really matters? There are more important considerations beyond NFU that become the deal breakers at time of the crisis. Thus, any discussion on Indian NFU should address an international audience since the regional actors are well aware of Indian capabilities, doctrine, posturing and ambitions and take them for what they are rather than for how they look in print.