



# CLAWS

## Debating the Future of India's Nuclear Deterrent

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The vulnerability of modern states to armed conflict with conventional weapons, coupled with the possibility of it extending into the nuclear realm, tends to accentuate the contextual and operational significance of deterrence. During the Cold War period, the nuclear doctrinal thinking of the US and erstwhile USSR, relied heavily on conceptual aspects of deterrence that stretched into the maximum deterrence paradigm. This centred on the logic of establishing strategic stability based on mutual assured destruction, while threatening each other with total annihilation. The theory of nuclear deterrence attempts to relate the use or threat of use of force to states' efforts to secure their interests through the strategy that leaves something to chance or the strategy of retaliation. As per Jasjit Singh's views cited in *Nuclear India*, nuclear weapons in the above-mentioned case were considered to be a military instrument of war-fighting, thus, theoretically extending deterrence from the dimension of punishment to include denial.

Discussing the case of India in particular, New Delhi has continuously aimed at promoting an ever-expanding area of peace and stability around it so that developmental priorities can be pursued without disruption. As a matter of fact, the Draft Report of the National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine (August 1999) stated that the very existence

of an offensive doctrine pertaining to the first use of nuclear weapons and the insistence of some nuclear weapon states on the legitimacy of their use even against non-nuclear weapon countries constitute a threat to peace and stability. Although India has always sought peaceful development and harmonious relations in its immediate and extended neighbourhood, certain geo-strategic realities and challenges, which confront India and threaten to upstage regional strategic stability, cannot be negated or ignored. India's deterrence mechanism stands attuned to the regional security scenario. The nuclear neighbourhood of New Delhi is witness to possession of advanced versions of Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capability, ranging from 8,000-14,000 km, capable of targeting the length and breadth of India in the event of a conflict.

That the South Asian security dilemma was pushed into the nuclear sphere in 1998 made for it being a source of constant deliberation within and outside the sub-continent. It could well be possible that in the case of South Asia, shifting political and military dynamics will reflect upon security perspectives, thus, goading strategic planners to outline their respective versions of nuclear deterrence so as to provide an underlying principle for the expansion of ongoing

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and projected nuclear inventories. Ever since formally declaring itself as a Nuclear Weapon State (NWS) in 1998, India has made ardent efforts to maintain and stabilise its nuclear deterrent and minimise existential nuclear dangers. In the Indian case, the logic of nuclear weapons has advertently directed its ensuing doctrine. The role of nuclear weapons as a political instrument confers on them a utility more in terms of political deterrence rather than limiting it to military deterrence. In this reference, New Delhi's nuclear weapons are entirely a political instrument in nature, whose sole purpose is to deter the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against itself. India requires nuclear weapons capabilities to dissuade and deter nuclear blackmail and coercion. India's nuclear doctrine and strategy are based on the political necessity of exercising the option and the nature of the environment in which it has to pursue national interests.

Notwithstanding that territorial wars are now an exception rather than a rule, which implies progressively lower levels of deterrence, it needs to be borne in mind that Asia houses the maximum number of NWS. India's nuclear doctrine outlines the strategy of "credible minimum deterrence" and also establishes that India will not be the first to initiate a nuclear strike. This declared "no-first-use" doctrine,

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thus, rules out the first-strike option and seeks to ensure the survivability of the nuclear arsenal for a credible second-strike capability. However, it also needs to be mentioned that in the event of deterrence failing, New Delhi shall respond with punitive retaliation, as has been acknowledged in the Draft Report of the National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine.

It has been established by now that conventional weapons alone cannot deter a nuclear adversary. A no-first-strike policy must be backed by an assured, effective and rapid second-strike capability for robust deterrence. Deterrence against a nuclear foe can only be built on nuclear capability, especially on the above-mentioned second-strike capability that can survive the enemy's first strike to inflict substantial retaliation. In order to achieve a credible minimal deterrent, India's nuclear doctrine calls for sufficient, survivable and operationally prepared nuclear forces; a robust command and control system; effective intelligence and early warning capabilities; comprehensive planning and training for operations in line with strategy; and the requisite primary and alternate chains of command to employ nuclear forces and weapons.

### *Searching for an Effective and Operational Nuclear Triad*

In line with the needs to cater for a deterrence posture that aims to deter a potential use or threat of use of nuclear weapons against India, the current nuclear posture and arsenal of achieving an operational nuclear triad is instrumental in order to grant credibility to India's position of credible minimum deterrence. The policy of "retaliation only" revolves around the survivability of India's arsenal. Besides, the necessity to sustain strategic deterrence revolves around possession of a nuclear triad, including development of three delivery components, namely, strategic bombers (carrier-based or land-based, armed with bombs or missiles), land-based missiles and

fleet ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). The long-term effectiveness of a nation's nuclear deterrent is determined not by a comparative quantitative comparison and war-fighting capability of the weapons, but by their inherent capacity to retaliate. In this backdrop, a retaliatory second-strike capability that is credible and invulnerable becomes imperative.

The nuclear triad will prove critical to enhance India's second-strike ability, thus, providing credence to India's deterrence mechanism. New Delhi ultimately seeks a force structure that is based on a triad composition, including nuclear-capable long-range aircraft, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) and Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), with actual weaponisation (i.e. weapons in a mated format) being held back. India's force structure is largely based upon its existing military assets, including the Agni and Prithvi range of missiles, in addition to the Sagarika, Shaurya, and Dhanush. Furthermore, the Sukhoi-30 MKIs and Mirage-2000s also ensure that India's limited arsenal can execute a successful second strike to cause damage that would be unacceptable to the adversary and, therefore, influence its cost-benefit analysis of undertaking a first strike. More recently, the INS *Chakra*, an 8,140 tonne nuclear-powered Akula-II class attack submarine, armed with 300 km Klub-S land-attack cruise missiles and advanced torpedoes, leased from Russia for 10 years, was formally inducted into the Indian Navy in April 2012. Although the INS *Chakra* falls short of providing India's long-awaited third leg of the nuclear weapons triad since it will not be armed with long-range strategic missiles, it nonetheless, offers, firstly, operational flexibility in blue-water operations, and, secondly, the capability to deploy a potent weapons delivery platform at a place of its choosing at long distances in stealth, thus, strengthening India's underwater combat arm.

It would only be pertinent to state here that the means of delivery assume critical importance since its

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survivability and effectiveness in reaching the likely decision points required in the deterrence paradigm finally define the credibility of the deterrence posture. The successful testing of the long-range Agni V missile by India in April 2012, has undoubtedly granted a major fillip to India's quest in so far as achievement of a credible minimum deterrent is concerned. Bolstering India's deterrent, the Agni V is being considered as the mainstay of India's nuclear delivery vectors and ends India's search and longing for an ICBM. The Agni V can best be described as India's most ambitiously zealous strategic missile system, owing primarily to its high road mobility, fast reaction ability and a strike range of 5,000 km. The accuracy of the Agni V missile can only be ascertained with frequent validation tests, before it gets fully inducted into the Indian armed forces by 2014-15. In that sense, it will be another two years before New Delhi sees the fully integrated and operational version of the Agni V missile.

The fact that India's deterrence debate revolves around a defensive doctrine, amply visible by a repeated affirmation of the "No-First-Use" principle shall only assist in enhancing regional strategic stability, desirable for the purpose of both deterrence stability and that of crisis stability. Most available analyses of deterrence refer to threats of using force, with arms races becoming the sequence of events that take place when nation-states in

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a confrontation want to increase the credibility of their ability to respond. The objective is to confirm protection against the possibility of destruction or domination by the adversary, since nuclear weapons can be used as much for defence as for attack.

The third and perhaps most significantly elusive of India's deterrent capacity is the much-awaited underwater leg of the nuclear triad—namely, the INS *Arihant*, an indigenous nuclear-powered submarine armed with the 'K' series nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles, likely to be fully operational and out at sea by early 2013. With the INS *Arihant's* induction, the survivability of India's second-strike capability would heighten, thereby ensuring credible deterrence. As the Indian Navy is poised to complete the nation's nuclear triad, it is expected that the final nuclear insurance will come from the sea—however, it needs to be underscored that this will only be possible once the INS *Arihant* begins deterrent patrols after undergoing extensive sea and missile trials.

Though it is apparent that there has been a delay in achieving the objective of a fully-operational nuclear triad, the journey towards this can be described as work in progress which will provide New Delhi with an option of upgrading its present strategic posture of "dissuasion" to one of "credible deterrence". In order to consolidate India's nuclear deterrence, the state of India's nuclear weapons, its command and control

structures as well as the status of operational readiness should recurrently come up for detailed review and debate by the decision-making authorities.

A no first-strike policy must be backed by an assured, effective and rapid second-strike capability that can survive the adversary's first strike and subsequently inflict substantial retaliation.

Since no first use of nuclear weapons is India's basic commitment, every effort shall be made to persuade other states possessing nuclear weapons to join an international treaty banning first use. Till the time nuclear weapons are present in the world, the related threats shall also remain. The sole permanent solution to this quandary remains a global commitment towards achieving universal, verifiable and non-discriminatory nuclear disarmament which will enhance and grant a sense of permanence to conceptual as well as operational levels of collective security. This is a cause, long espoused by India, and being a national security objective, New Delhi shall continue its efforts towards seeking to achieve the goal of a nuclear weapon-free world.

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*Views expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.*



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