

## **India's Defence strategy in a Nuclear World**

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### **Introduction**

*“There are indications because of new inventions, that 10, 15, or 20 nations will have a nuclear capacity, including Red China, by the end of the Presidential office in 1964. This is extremely serious. . . I think the fate not only of our own civilization, but I think the fate of world and the future of the human race is involved in preventing a nuclear war.”[1]*

Though this did not happen in 1964, the fact that 44 states[2] are nuclear capable has proved that JFK's fears were not misplaced. In a world where many states and non-state actors are seeking nuclear weapons today the issue of nuclear proliferation assumes a lot of importance today. Against this backdrop, countries like India need to revamp their defence strategy.

Keeping non-proliferation as the locomotive of its foreign policy, the US administration has announced its plans to deal with states like Iran, North Korea, Libya and others that nurse nuclear ambitions in recent years. However there are limits to its policies of persuasion and coercion. Even if it is the largest nuclear weapon power in the world today, it cannot threaten states into permanent abstinence. For long, nuclear proliferation was thought to be a 'bottled genie' with only five great powers possessing the nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the number rose from 5 in 1964 to 8 in 1998. There is no certainty that this list would not grow in the coming years.

It is also evident from the examples of states like North Korea, Iran or Iraq, that international sanctions and reactions cannot stop the pace of proliferation. Moreover, the threat of terrorists – non state actors – getting hold of nuclear weapons or their know-how, is looming as great a challenge as that of horizontal proliferation. In a world of increasing nuclear weapon and nuclear capable powers what is the strategy that India needs to adopt to defend itself is the question.

### **Nuclear neighbourhood**

The Indian nation state is uniquely placed as a predominant power in a region with unresolved local and regional issues. Festering conflicts, economic and strategic competitions combined with nuclear capability make a potent mix. India has fought four wars and suffered one defeat. In spite of its overwhelming regional sway, it has been unable to launch more decisive victories or to check regional and extra regional ambitions. The tendency of Pakistan to seek parity with India has spurred an arms race and kept the region in a perpetual state of unease and instability.

Pakistan has indeed built its national security apparatus mostly on the assumption of 'undoing' or outdoing India. Historical animosity with Pakistan and China who are nuclear weapon states, dominates India's strategic thinking. While even conventional rivalry is dangerous, the fact that these countries possess nuclear capability, adds an entirely new dimension to the strategic scenario.

Out of the 44 nuclear capable nations most are developing ones and some are declared theocracies. A pan-continental religious nexus including many of these nuclear capable or weapon countries is another probability India needs to contemplate upon. The issue of religious fundamentalism, forming the arc of insecurity around India is especially worrisome. The idea of the Islamic bomb that could be developed as a counter to India's "regional hegemony" feeds on this theory of encirclement. The reality that nuclear status can be obtained through clandestine cooperation is also a point of concern.

The inevitability of limited wars in a nuclear environment is yet another factor to be dealt with. Wars have become limited, not because states cannot fight unlimited or prolonged wars but, due to specific set of structural circumstances. The presence of nuclear weapons in the sub continent makes unlimited wars "untenable as a matter of state policy" in theory[3]. However, in practice the possession of nukes does not necessarily make all wars obsolete. This is the dilemma of the nuclear age. The question facing India therefore is how does India win a limited war and check escalation. This would be one of the most important questions India's future defence strategy must address.

### **Nuclear Terrorism**

Apart from this there is the fear of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. Reports of organizations like the Al Qaeda having or seeking weapon designs, nuclear material and related equipment support this view. While building nuclear weapons is deemed difficult if not impossible, the accidental fall of weapons into the hands of the terrorists cannot be ruled out. Rogue states or states that sponsor terrorism or help terrorist outfits in training, arms acquisition or sanctuary could also assist terrorists in their nuclear odyssey.

There is the problem of alleged loose nukes or the relatively free availability of nuclear weapons sans control and authority. Technical advancement has simplified the construction and delivery of nuclear weapons. The miniaturized forms of the weapons such as the 'suitcase' bombs that could be detonated within an hour could be a source of nuclear terror. The declaration in the past such as that of Alexander Lebed[4], National security advisor to Boris Yeltsin, regarding the possibility of unguarded nuclear weapons in states of the former Soviet Union, had raised the spectre of nuclear terror. Recent reports corroborate to the development of miniature models or compact varieties that are easily portable and usable. In response to the possibility of loose nukes and their transfer to other actors, states like US have come out with specific acts to handle such an eventuality. Former Senator Richard Lugar and Georgia Democrat Sam Nunn sponsored a law in 1991 (Nunn-Lugar amendment) known as the 'Cooperative Threat Reduction Program' that provides American technical and financial aid to the former states of the Soviet Union to eliminate nuclear warheads made redundant by arms control pacts, and account for and control nuclear materials[5].

## Strategic paralysis?

Another important factor is the abysmal level of Indian strategic thinking. From the days of Kautilya's calculated offensive, we have plunged into a defensive mode. India's current strategy of 'defensive defence' is a reactive policy. Added to this, the declaration of 'no-first use' even in the case of nuclear weapons puts India squarely on the back foot. This is especially difficult in a region where other powers like Pakistan have openly professed resort to nuclear destruction in the face of conventional reversals. The adoption of this defensive posture has yielded no outright victory in the past fifty five years. Victory occurred solely by resorting to sound tactical planning and strategic initiative. Indian strategy has the following demerits:

- Forfeiture of the advantage of pre-emption
- Allows maximum leverage to the enemy
- Proves ineffective against 'misadventures'
- Lack of decision-execution synergy

Thus a total lack of vision has hampered a coherent, effective defence strategy.

This defensive strategic doctrine has put India in an extremely vulnerable position. The enemy can hold us to ransom as the subcontinent's pre-eminent power does not project any counter-threat. The doctrine now followed seeks to defend India by deploying military forces merely to push back the invasion behind borders. This allows leverage for the enemy to strike the other day. It is nothing but an extension of the centuries-old "fortress-mentality"[6] that resulted in invasions from the west.

India's posture of 'defensive defence' has not yielded dividends. Indian condition is unique in that perhaps it is the only state in the world that has professed a no-first use in the case of nuclear weapons. While countries like South Africa have surrendered their nuclear weapon capability, India has retained this while restricting itself to responsive rather than pre-emptive strategy. In such a case the burden on India's conventional defence is heightened. Countries like Pakistan retain 'first use' option. In the face of conventional defeat, Pakistan might employ nuclear arms which can only be retaliated by India. Also, the '*credible minimum deterrent*' has placed nuclear arsenal in a state of alert but not readiness. The nuclear doctrine, also suggests a possible triad for nuclear control and the road to tri-force effectiveness are only now being made public (partially if not wholly).

## Conclusion

The reality of living in a nuclear environment is a wake-up call for Indian defence strategists. Despite conventional superiority India is unable to repay Pakistani attacks or incursions in a fitting manner. This is mainly due to the nuclear parity reached through acquisition of nuclear capability. The attempts at confidence building and peace might be laudable. Yet, the threat of a future conflict deadlier and more dangerous than all previous ones is present.

India's current defence posture leaves much to be desired for. The 'defensive defence' reduces initial advantage of pre-emption and reduces policy maneuverability. The enemy holds the

element of surprise. Not only individually but collective hostility of many countries against India can mean aggregation of resources. Other than the use of nuclear forces, traditional structure of Indian armed forces must also gear up to the new challenges.

While the nuclear doctrine suggests fashioning of a '*credible minimum deterrent*', India faces formidable technical challenges in developing reliable warheads. This is compounded by the announcement of a test moratorium which completely restrains India's verification of effectiveness of nuclear warheads. In the possibility of India developing such untested warheads, their attrition power in actual combat can only be unreliable.

It is thus suggested, that India should adopt an offensive-defence strategy– an assertive but not aggressive philosophy, which can effectively counter destructive forces. For this, a proper appreciation of the situation and counter-action to neutralise the developing threat is essential. The "cold start strategy"[7] unveiled last year by the Indian army is a step in the right direction. Seeking to check adventurism, this doctrine aims at launching integrated multiple strikes into enemy territory. Other than a well-thought out strategy, two factors come into play. They are:

- \* Facing or even ignoring international pressure
- \* Possessing a deterring military capability

Care should be taken not to succumb to international pressure or seek international diplomatic support for countering offensive actions. India has retreated from strategic decisions many a time due to fear of international reprisals and sanctions. The geo-political and geo-economic compulsions that drive most reactions are to be realised. Since we have to win our wars, the accretion of a lethal, offensive military capability that would deter the enemy is a paramount requirement. Integrated approaches to the policy making incorporating foreign policy, diplomacy and defence policy can alone guard India in an unstable nuclear world.

Upgrading her force specific strategies, organizational structures, fighting ability or teeth can only be the initial steps in a more assertive, realistic and winnable approach to India's defence in a nuclear world.

## END NOTES

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[http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/11/17\\_carnegie\\_jfk-nuclear.htm](http://www.wagingpeace.org/articles/2003/11/17_carnegie_jfk-nuclear.htm)
2. The 44 states are Algeria, Argentina Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium Brazil Bulgaria Canada Chile Colombia China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Italy, Israel, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Poland, Pakistan, Romania, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United States of America, United Kingdom, Vietnam and Zaire. Source:  
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4. [http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/news/Alexander Lebed and Suitcase Nukes. htm](http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/news/Alexander%20Lebed%20and%20Suitcase%20Nukes.htm)
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7. Subash Kapila, India's New "Cold Start " War Doctrine Strategically Reviewed, <http://militaryaffairsboard.com/showthread.php?t=4342> accessed September 8, 2005