In April 2014, India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which would be swept into office the following month, included in its manifesto a tantalizing promise to “revise and update” India’s nuclear doctrine “to make it relevant to challenges of current times.” [1] When pressed, party officials suggested they were specifically interested in tinkering with India’s no-first-use policy.

Almost immediately, Narendra Modi, the BJP’s candidate for prime minister, clarified that the policy “was a great initiative of Atal Bihari Vajpayee,” a former BJP prime minister. Modi added that “there is no compromise on that. We are very clear. [It] is a reflection of our cultural inheritance.” [2]

Shortly after taking office as prime minister, in remarks to an audience in Japan in August, Modi said that “there is a tradition of national consensus and continuity on such issues. I can tell you that currently, we are not taking any initiative for a review of our nuclear doctrine.” [3] This would have reassured foreign observers and dismayed some Indians, as it indicated that Modi’s self-assured vision for foreign and security policy probably would not apply to the nuclear realm. Although Modi apparently had decided against an imminent shift, his party’s manifesto nevertheless was reflective of a new current of critical thinking on India’s nuclear doctrine.

India’s nuclear modernization over the past 15 years has largely been framed in material terms: the rising numbers of warheads, the growing ranges of missiles, and the improving delivery systems. These undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping the triangular deterrent relationship among India,
Pakistan, and China. Yet, so do psychological factors, which are shaped in turn by a state’s doctrine, the terms in which the state thinks and talks about potential nuclear use.

In 1998, just after its nuclear tests, India bowed to U.S. pressure and released a draft nuclear doctrine that ruled out first use and endorsed “credible minimum deterrence” while noting that the latter was “a dynamic concept related to the strategic environment, technological imperatives and the needs of national security.”[^4] That elasticity was exploited in the next iteration of the nuclear doctrine, a terse official statement issued in 2003.[^5] By that year, India’s nuclear doctrine stood on two connected pillars: India would not use nuclear weapons first, but if its opponents did so, then India’s response would be overwhelming.

**Pressure on No-First-Use Pledge**

Right from the start, the two pillars were under pressure. A no-first-use policy is tantamount to a declaration of nonuse against states that do not possess nuclear weapons. (Because such states cannot use nuclear arms at all, they cannot use these weapons first. Therefore, any use of nuclear weapons by India against these states would be a case of first use.) The 1998 doctrine modified the policy by noting that states that do not have nuclear weapons but are “aligned with” nuclear-weapon states were not covered.[^6] The implication was that non-nuclear-weapon states allied with India’s nuclear-armed adversaries—realistically, China or Pakistan—could be targeted with Indian nuclear weapons if their ally were to have used nuclear weapons against India first.

This proviso has very few implications in practice, given the improbability of non-nuclear-weapon states joining hands with China or Pakistan in a war against India, but it demonstrated India’s willingness to experiment with its doctrine. In addition, the 1998 change undercut earlier claims that the no-first-use pledge was “unconditional” because use of nuclear weapons against a third party that did not possess nuclear weapons, even if precipitated by nuclear first use by China or Pakistan, would still constitute Indian first use of a sort.[^7]

In 2003, when a new statement of doctrine was issued, India further diluted the doctrine by warning that it might use nuclear weapons in response to a “major attack” with chemical or biological weapons, possibly mimicking the “calculated ambiguity” of the U.S. nuclear posture in relation to attacks with nonconventional weapons other than nuclear ones.[^8] To determine why the no-first-use policy was being whittled down, it helps to break down the types of arguments that critics have presented because these arguments have tended to recur.

**Keeping even with peers.** India should reject a stance that is “weaker” than those of its nuclear peers, particularly the United States or China.[^9] For instance, when China was mistakenly viewed as having modified its own no-first-use pledge in 2013, some Indians demanded that India follow suit.[^10]

**Demonstrating assertiveness.** If nuclear adversaries were taking bold steps, India should do so too even if a response, in the form of a more forceful doctrine, would assume a completely different form. For instance, India should respond to an adversary’s warhead buildup (a change in posture) by altering its no-first-use policy (a change in doctrine).

**Broadening the scope of deterrence.** India should use nuclear weapons to deter not only nuclear attacks, but also chemical and biological attacks. Such an argument implicitly drove the change in 2003.

**Strengthening deterrence.** A threat of first use can instill greater uncertainty in adversaries and thereby deter them from even non-nuclear provocations. The specific concern here tends to be Pakistan and its sponsorship of terrorist groups.

**Maintaining the pre-emption option.** First use would allow India to respond to an adversary’s imminent nuclear use, limiting the damage to India, giving India’s relatively small nuclear forces a better chance of survival, or both.

No individual critic has ever made these five arguments together, but they can all be found, with
growing frequency, in Indian writings. A sample of the many cases that could be cited illustrates the point.

In 2011, Jaswant Singh, India's former external affairs, defense, and finance minister and a crucial figure in the U.S.-Indian arms control discussions that followed the 1998 tests, addressed the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament. Raising what he called “the most important question that concerns us all globally,” he argued that the policies he had framed in 1998 and 1999 were “very greatly in need of revision because the situation that warranted the enunciation of the policy of ‘no-first-use’ or...‘credible deterrence with minimum force’, etc. has long been overtaken by events.”[11]

This reassessment and blunt recommendation is significant, coming as it does from a former senior official who as foreign minister was the most prominent public champion of India’s no-first-use commitment and who, in a September 1999 speech to the UN General Assembly, exhorted the established nuclear powers to pledge likewise.[12]

Tellingly, Singh did not explain in his 2011 speech why, precisely, reserving the right to use nuclear weapons first would increase Indian security or address the problems he had earlier identified, such as a growing perceived imbalance in warhead numbers between India and Pakistan in the latter's favor. He declined a request by the author to elaborate on his logic.[13]

Singh’s analysis does not make a clear connection between the claimed source of the problem—events that have changed India’s security situation—and his proposed solution of a change in doctrine. This might suggest that Singh’s interest in modifying the no-first-use policy, like the interest of others, arose primarily from a generalized desire for nuclear assertiveness as a response to perceived adverse shifts in India’s security and nuclear environment, rather than from a belief in some specific deterrent benefits of potential first use. Put another way, Singh advocated changing the no-first-use policy not because he objected to the policy per se, but because he sought some means of prominently demonstrating Indian resolve in the nuclear realm.

In 2012 an influential Indian think tank, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, convened a task force of experts from across India’s governmental and nongovernmental strategic community. The task force, which was chaired by P.R. Chari, a former civil servant in India’s Ministry of Defence and a respected analyst, published “an alternative blueprint” of India’s nuclear doctrine.[14] That blueprint declared that “India will not initiate a nuclear strike,” but added, cryptically, “‘Initiation’ covers the process leading up to the actual use of a nuclear weapon by an adversary. This would include mating component systems and deploying warheads with the intent of using them if required.”

This reinterpretation of nuclear initiation is tenuous and confusing, but nonetheless far-reaching to the point of absurdity. It suggests that, in a crisis, if Pakistan were merely to mate warheads to missiles or even co-locate previously dispersed nuclear pits and warheads to increase the weapons’ readiness and therefore survivability, this might be interpreted in India as Pakistan having formally “initiated” a nuclear strike. This, in turn, would permit India to launch nuclear weapons first while claiming that it had adhered to its no-first-use policy. Naturally, this amounts to an imprimatur for pre-emption.

Importantly, such arguments are not on the fringe. In June 2014, Lieutenant General B.S. Nagal, head of India’s Strategic Forces Command between 2008 and 2011 and thereafter a department under India’s national security adviser, made a radical argument in India's Force magazine, saying that India under a no-first-use policy “cannot conduct a first strike on the adversary’s counterforce targets, thus allowing the adversary full capability to attrite [India’s] own capability.” Nagal's argument is that a no-first-use commitment requires that India potentially absorb a nuclear attack on its own nuclear weapons, leaving New Delhi’s arsenal depleted and therefore incapable of launching a second strike to destroy the adversary’s remaining nuclear forces. This, in turn, forces India to resort to countervalue strikes—that is, strikes against population centers—something Nagal regards as a “moral dilemma.”

Nagal consequently argues in favor of replacing the no-first-use policy with a policy of “ambiguity” that “does not allow destruction of the nation and strategic forces at the outset; hence the arsenal is
intact for use.” Ambiguity, Nagal contends, “provides a better range of options to launch decapitating and/or disarming strikes to deal with the adversary leadership/arsenal.“[15] Such drastic language is admittedly rare in the Indian debate, but Nagal is not alone. Another former strategic forces commander, Vice Admiral Vijay Shankar, has argued that Indian forces require “select conventional hardware that tracks and targets [adversary] nuclear forces” to “provide the pre-emptive teeth to a deterrent relationship that leans so heavily” on the no-first-use policy.[16] These are striking arguments, coming from individuals who have served at the apex of India’s nuclear weapons program.

One might reasonably argue that Nagal and Shankar are advancing agendas they could not implement while in office and that their prescriptions place implausibly heavy demands on India’s existing and future intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities. Yet, their arguments are likely to shape the tone and substance of the public debate over the coming years, a debate that will weigh on future Indian governments. For these critics, the fundamental purpose of diluting the no-first-use policy is to keep India’s adversaries guessing about the nuclear threshold in the hope that the resultant ambiguity deters a greater range of threats.[17]

Pressure on Massive Retaliation

As described above, Modi appears to have poured cold water on moves to alter the no-first-use policy in the direction urged by critics such as Nagal and Shankar. Barring a significant exogenous shock, such as a successful terrorist attack from Pakistan that is interpreted as a failure of deterrence, this is unlikely to change. There is, however, a second pressure on doctrine, relating to the formulation of the policy of massive retaliation. It is ironic that the stronger party in a potential conflict on the subcontinent—India, in relation to Pakistan—should find itself debating the value of flexible nuclear use doctrines, as such pressures ordinarily fall on the party whose conventional forces are weaker. Yet, this is precisely what has happened.
It is often forgotten that massive retaliation was not always part of India’s doctrine. India’s 1999 draft doctrine promised only “punitive” retaliation, a pliable term consistent with both limited and higher-order nuclear use. It was mentioned three times in the document, indicating that considerable care went into its usage. Yet, four years later, the summary of India’s 2003 revised doctrine stated that “nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage.”[18] It is unclear whether the changed wording was intentional or merely a function of the revision process. After all, the 1999 draft was never an official document, and different personnel were involved in the creation of each doctrine.

Indian concerns over the credibility of massive retaliation are long-standing, and one can find Indian thinkers debating its finer points in the 1980s and earlier. These concerns have sharpened in recent years because of Pakistan’s reported cultivation of tactical nuclear weapons, which themselves can be placed under the broader category of limited nuclear options.[19]

Simply put, Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons are perceived to constrain India’s ability to wage limited conventional war in retaliation for terrorist attacks attributed to the Pakistani authorities. This is because if Pakistan employed tactical nuclear weapons, avoiding Indian population centers, a massive Indian nuclear response would not be a proportional and therefore credible response. In addition, Pakistan’s strategic nuclear weapons ensure that it could then conduct a further round of nuclear retaliation against Indian population centers were India to have first attacked Pakistani population centers, thereby creating a further layer of deterrence against New Delhi.

In addition to this well-worn proportionality-credibility problem, there is a second, strategic problem.
Whereas India increasingly prepares itself for limited war, “massive retaliation proposes a war with unlimited means for unlimited ends.” If wars are limited, the logic of punishment must be subordinate to the logic of war termination. In other words, India’s use of a nuclear doctrine that carries a high risk of escalation to high-level nuclear use is dissonant with its broader political-military strategy, which is to avoid the kind of large-scale wars that characterized the subcontinent before the 1970s. Indian wars would have limited aims, such as curbing Pakistan’s support for terrorist groups or satisfying Indian public opinion.

Limited aims require that a state end a war at the earliest possible opportunity compatible with these aims. Because massive retaliation escalates a conflict or is seen to do so, it precludes this. Gaurav Kampani, who has studied the development of India’s nuclear program, citing multiple former chairmen of India’s Chiefs of Staff Committee, notes that “senior Indian military leaders” favor “highly calibrated Indian counter-response to terminate war at the lowest possible level of nuclear exchange.”

Thus far, Indian policymakers have publicly reiterated that, despite these complaints, they will not be self-deterred from adhering to the letter of their doctrine on massive retaliation. In an important speech in New Delhi in April 2013, former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, presumably speaking with some degree of official sanction, defended India’s nuclear doctrine and posture from a variety of criticisms.

If India is attacked with such weapons, it would engage in nuclear retaliation which will be massive and designed to inflict unacceptable damage on the adversary. As I have pointed out earlier, the label on a nuclear weapon used for attacking India, strategic or tactical, is irrelevant from the Indian perspective. A limited nuclear war is a contradiction in terms. Any nuclear exchange, once initiated, would swiftly and inexorably escalate to the strategic level. Pakistan would be prudent not to assume otherwise as it sometimes appears to do, most recently by developing and perhaps deploying theatre nuclear weapons.

Saran’s protestations are not taken entirely seriously even within the various branches of India’s nuclear establishment. As Rear Admiral Raja Menon, formerly chairman of the task force on Net Assessment and Simulation in India’s National Security Council, wrote in *The Hindu* in January 2014, “the ideational systems that will ensure the ‘massive’ retaliation promised in [India’s] doctrine are being increasingly questioned by scholars and analysts worldwide.” He added that “Pakistani observers cannot help but be swayed and dangerously influenced by such literature, thereby inducing them to think the unthinkable,” that a nuclear war, once initiated, could be controlled. Menon later argued that India should replace “massive” with “punitive,” as was the case in India’s 1999 draft doctrine, with the aim of signaling India’s “readiness to fight an escalatory nuclear war.”

Other mainstream analysts have argued likewise. In June 2014, Chari lamented that “the determinism inherent in India’s nuclear doctrine…is too extreme to gain much credibility. It defies logic to threaten an adversary with nuclear annihilation to deter or defend against a tactical nuclear strike on an advancing military formation.” In January 2015, Gurmeet Kanwal, former director of India’s Centre for Land Warfare Studies, repeated that “the word ‘massive’…should be substituted with ‘punitive’ as massive is not credible and limits retaliatory options.”

Even if India were to change its doctrine to punitive rather than massive retaliation, actually developing a range of nuclear options from limited to massive would still be highly challenging. The United States did not possess credible and sophisticated limited nuclear options for two decades after first deploying nuclear weapons.

Among the future challenges for India will be reconciling nuclear flexibility with exceptionally strong, positive, civilian control. Retired senior military officers routinely complain that the armed forces must have greater involvement in the formulation of nuclear policies. Although India has indeed involved its military in nuclear policy over the last decade to a greater extent than at any prior time, civilian political leaders continue to place great emphasis on retaining the authority and the time to make any final decision on nuclear use. They insist on preserving that authority until the last possible moment and would refrain from authorizing a series of low-level, tit-for-tat nuclear strikes.
because such strikes might require selection among a large and changing number of targets and a high degree of responsiveness to adversary decisions. Furthermore, such strikes might initiate a sequence that spirals out of control and reduce civilian management of each step up the escalation ladder.

These civilian concerns inhibit the prospect of pre-emptive first-use doctrines, but they also restrict India’s ability to employ limited nuclear options in precisely the most likely contingencies—notably, limited Indian offensives on Pakistani territory. This is because limited Indian nuclear use on Pakistani soil could interfere with Indian conventional forces present, but Indian civilians might be reluctant to allow coordination between Indian conventional and nuclear forces in a manner that enhances military authority in the nuclear process. Nevertheless, this would not necessarily rule out relatively simple limited nuclear options, such as the use of lower-yield nuclear weapons against static Pakistani military sites. Such targets could be chosen in advance and would not require a highly sophisticated targeting capability. Moreover, use of nuclear weapons against such targets, depending on location, would not necessarily require a high degree of coordination with conventional forces. In this way, India could reintroduce the possibility of nuclear use that is limited and thus proportional and credible, as described above, thereby addressing the problems identified by critics.

Conclusion

This article has described a series of arguments against two pillars of India’s nuclear doctrine, namely its no-first-use and massive retaliation policies. Underpinning many of these arguments is a widespread sense that “the strategic environment, technological imperatives and...national security,” the factors to which credible minimum deterrence was pegged in 1998, have evolved in the 17 years since India’s nuclear tests and that India’s psychological and material position with regard to nuclear weapons has eroded. Among the causes of this anxiety are the growth in the size and sophistication of Pakistan’s arsenal, perceived slowness in Indian nuclear modernization, nuclear and conventional advances by China, and a worsening security environment on India’s periphery, notably in Afghanistan and Pakistan. All of these factors are aggravated by the Indian state’s opacity with regard to nuclear affairs.

Indian critics’ arguments toward Indian nuclear doctrine should be considered with a series of caveats in mind. First, three consecutive prime ministers have reaffirmed the no-first-use policy, and Modi has ruled out its elimination. Second, many of the arguments described in this article assume the existence of capabilities and institutional changes, some of which are not presently feasible and others of which, notably disarming first strikes, may never become so. Third, there are prominent and numerous examples of advocacy for the status quo. These include Saran’s speech, cited above, and writings by former diplomats Jayant Prasad and Rakesh Sood, all of whom worked on nuclear issues in their careers.[29]

In 2002 a committee appointed to “review the national security system in its entirety” produced the “Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security.” It noted that “the publication of a white paper on the Indian nuclear weapons programme is highly desirable.”[30] This report was partially implemented, but progress was interrupted by the change of government in 2004. A decade later, if the BJP follows through on its commitment at least to look again at India’s nuclear doctrine, then any future review process could afford an opportunity for revisionist voices to apply pressure on the government.

It should be remembered that, in the past, reviews by the Indian government have frequently been commissioned and then ignored, the most notable being a series of defense and security reviews stretching back decades.[31] Therefore, even a review recommending modification of the doctrine would not necessarily lead to revision. If it does, then a shift in the policy of massive retaliation toward ambiguity and flexibility—perhaps a reversion to pre-2003 language of “punitive” retaliation—would be the likeliest outcome. Yet, even this might require a catalyst or shock, such as another major act of terrorism on Indian soil, similar to the November 2008 attacks on Mumbai, that comes to be seen as a failure of deterrence.

Shashank Joshi is a senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London and a
Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University. He has written previously on Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons and other aspects of Indian and Pakistani nuclear weapons. This article is based on ideas first presented in a chapter in the Stimson Center’s edited volume *Deterrence Instability and Nuclear Weapons in South Asia* (2015).

**ENDNOTES**


6. Indian draft nuclear doctrine, clause 2.5.


14. *India’s Nuclear Doctrine: An Alternative Blueprint* (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict
India’s Nuclear Anxieties: The Debate Over Doctrine
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)


