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Draft Nuclear Doctrine of India: Return to Reality

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NoteNo. 50

(Our first reaction to the draft Indian nuclear doctrine was given in the note "Credible Nuclear Arsenal: Incredible delusions" by Mr. Raman. We have been watching with alarm the discussions going on among the analysts and the delusions that continue. The Foreign minister's recent statement is timely and realistic. The present note is from another analyst who is well versed in this subject-- Director)

After the National Security Advisory Board has issued the draft Nuclear Doctrine, the first official and authoritative view on the subject was available by way of a recent interview given by Foreign minister Jaswant Singh who has made the welcome comment that India has no desire to pursue an open ended nuclear weapon programme and that the talk of a traditional nuclear triad is premature.

With due deference to some of the best intellects comprising the National Security Advisory Board, one must admit that a reading of the draft nuclear doctrine gives the impression that it is full of generalisations generated from the cold war literature of the fifties and the sixties. Basically, a country's nuclear doctrine is closely related to its defence policies and consequent strategy. One is not aware of the details of such policies and strategies though papers on the subject have apparently been prepared by the NSAB. It is not however difficult to envisage the security threats for India in the coming century (talking of millenium is unreasonable as a country's history undergoes enormous changes in a millenium as India's own history has in the last millenium.) and hence the needed policies and strategies.

India's immediate threat to its well being as a secular democratic and prosperous country emerges from the policy of implacable hostility followed by Pakistan. After having unsuccessfully fought with India three times over Kashmir, it made another desperate attempt in its recent misadventure at Kargil which ended in its Prime Minister's journey to the prison and installation of one more despotic regime in the name of

"saving the country." Predictably, Pakistan reverted to the easy and low cost method of depredations through mercenary desperados who were sought to be dignified by the epithet " mujahideens". The attack on the Military Hqrs at Badami bagh in Kashmir makes it clear that if anything, the new regime would actively and more aggressively follow the policy of low cost conflict in Kashmir. The Kargil adventure was started by Pakistan under the misplaced confidence that India would not enlarge the war for fear of escalating it to the nuclear level. Comparisons have been made between the restrained reaction of India now and in 1965 when it opened a second front to stop the Pakistanis in their track. Be that as it may, Pakistanis are emboldened enough to keep trying their hands at wresting Kashmir from India both by the so called "low intensity conflict " and occasional misadventures in the hope that one day they will succeed.

What should be India's response? Would it be forced to open a second front in the future if situation warrants and if so would it be prepared if Pakistan escalates it to the nuclear level, rejecting as they have, the policy of no first use. If such a sorry situation comes to pass what are our options since we have foregone the option of first use? No first use would mean a second strike capability ie. absorbing Pakistan's first nuclear attack and delivering "unacceptable damage" to them. This policy is predicated on Pakistani perception of "unacceptable damage" which should deter them from carrying out the first attack. The imponderables here are the extent of damage to us in the first nuclear attack by Pakistan and Pakistan's view of "unacceptable damage ". Assessing these and coming to a conclusion on what minimum capability we need is what minimum deterrence is all about as far as threat from Pakistan goes.

Next comes the so called China threat. Notwithstanding the problems and trauma left behind by the inglorious war of 1962, one cannot see any immediate threat from China. Though slow and tortuous, negotiations are on between the two countries to find an equitable solution to the border disputes. China is unlikely to and in fact has no need to resort to arms to settle the issue, China's major strategic objectives in the 1962 war have been achieved. The vexing problem with China is the latter's continuous support to Pakistan in the latter's quest for nuclear and missile capability. Even here, there seems to have been considerable progress with China seemingly inclined to end its proliferation policies under American pressure. Some Indian Strategists see in a long term perspective, future conflicts between India and China over "Lebensraum". This is an intangible threat and a better way to prepare for it is by strengthening India's economic and technological potentials. Without dismissing outright security threat from China as non existent, an immediate threat from China is not apparent , given China's perception of its security problems and its anxiety to have a peaceful neighbourhood, to pursue its ambitious economic plan and reach the standards of developed countries by the middle of the next century. In any case India needs considerable time to catch up with China's weapon and missile capabilities.

The third threat justifying India's nuclear quest is what the draft nuclear doctrine calls as the absence of global nuclear disarmament requiring effective, credible, nuclear deterrence and adequate retaliatory capability in India's strategic interests, should deterrence fail. In effect this means that India should be ready to face the world with its nuclear weapons! - a controversial concept based on somewhat exaggerated view of threat to its security and the need to prepare for it.

In the light of the foregoing does India need an elaborate nuclear weapons system involving triad of bombers and land and sea based missiles? This could be examined against each of the threats discussed earlier.

Taking the nuclear threat from Pakistan, a nuclear exchange between the two countries, no matter who starts it first, would leave neither country a victor but both vanquished in the killing fields of radio active debris which does not recognise international borders. It is quite unrealistic to plan for elaborate command and control system with brief cases and buttons following the P.M. A missile from Pakistan should not take more than five to 10 minutes to reach India, to be more specific New Delhi. To be somewhat light hearted on a grave issue - What happens when the P.M has a bath even for a modest 10 minutes and Pakistanis let go a nuke? Would another elaborate command and control centre be established in deep south, if - God forbid - New Delhi or its command and control centre is wiped out. As another commentator has said, it would be height of cynicism to provide only for protection of India's nuclear weapons and leave the people to their fate. With no information available on the accuracy of the missiles of either country it can only be presumed that both are planning on deterrence by city bursting capability which requires no great accuracy of the missiles. Even assuming that the second strike capability is fully established and India proceeds to punish Pakistan with " unacceptable damage" what would it be sufficient number of bombs to wipe out Islamabad and Lahore if not Karachi? How would the returning radioactive debris be taken care of from wiping out large segment of our population by cancer related deaths, not to speak of subsequent generation of maimed children. It is thus obvious that nuclear war is unthinkable between the two countries.

One hopes that such wisdom exists also among the present rulers of Pakistan though they may not be rational on other Indo - Pak issues. Fear however has been expressed that current instability in Pakistan could force it towards a fundamentalist , extremist regime which could irrationally think of using nukes. against India. Though possession of certain no. of nukes and the means to deliver them may deter nuclear attack even by the irrational Islamists building an elaborate triad of bombers, missiles and submarines at enormous cost would in no way completely eliminate this threat and would certainly not merit mention as " minimum deterrence". As a respected member of the Indian scientific establishment is reported to have once said " A bullock cart is enough to carry the bomb across the border!

The most ideal deterrence against Pakistan is to build a system of smart weapons which could be used to decapitate its nuclear capability, if it looks that a conventional war is in danger of escalating into a nuclear one. The prerequisites for such a plan is a good intelligence capability based on a robust sensor technology combined with a good chip industry (as these could be denied to us at crucial moments) to build the smart weapons. Mobile missiles may not be eliminated completely by this plan but even mobile missiles take some time to set up and fire and excellent intelligence and possession of anti missile capability are the only hopes to avert this threat. Critics might point out that it is a very expensive proposition but then you can't talk of nuclear deterrence against others without your being deterred, if you are not willing to accept the cost of being a deterring nuclear power. In the final analysis India has to accept or atleast plan for the possibility of a limited nuclear attack, having gone nuclear and having an irrational nuclear neighbour. All other nuclear powers do. Hope lies in minimum damage if complete elimination is not possible.

On the threat from China, such a threat as already indicated is not an immediate one - not in any case a threat which can escalate into a nuclear one. Both countries have declared No First Use Policy and One cannot envisage a situation where China comes under sufficient pressure from India to break its own declaration and use the nuclear weapon against India first. Today; India's nuclear and missile capabilities are far lower than that of China. China itself is in the process of modernising its nuclear and missile forces including miniaturisation of war heads for tactical weapons and MIRV capability, though the target of its modernisation may not be India. India would require a much longer time frame to achieve parity and deterrence capability against China - may be 20 years at a modest reckoning and assuming a steady increase in India's technological capability .

As for developing nuclear capability from the point of view of a global threat, India should give up any notion of preparing a plan with this perspective. A nuclear policy based on such threat perception would entail enormous cost with the system of triads (particularly nuclear armed submarines from survivability angle), acquisition of sufficient number of warheads, and missiles with MIRV capabilities to establish the deterrence of a second strike capability .Can India ignore the opportunity cost of these systems which can go into social sector like health, education and employment, especially when such systems seem to be totally unwarranted in the global context.

It is therefore reassuring to read the foreign minister's views that a triad of nuclear forces is not a prerequisite for credibility and that the idea of a hair trigger alert for Indian nuclear forces is dangerous. **A sane statement that could return India to reality.**

(The author is a retired Special Secretary of the Cabinet Secretariat)

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