

India's Nuclear Strategy

(CAPS, 21 February 2011)

Speaking Notes

S.Menon

Air Commodore Jasjit Singh,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for asking me to speak to this very useful course on India's nuclear strategy. Previous editions of this course have done a great deal to contribute to the nuclear education of our establishment. Judging by the list of speakers to follow, you will be hearing from some of those who are most knowledgeable on this subject in India.

I thought that I would speak to you about our nuclear doctrine, and what it has meant in practice in terms of deterring Pakistan and China. I shall speak frankly in the knowledge that what we say here will stay within us, and to provoke a discussion later.

India's Nuclear Doctrine

When India carried out nuclear weapons tests in May 1998, twenty-four years after first displaying the capability to do so in May 1974, she also became the first nuclear weapon state to publicly announce and debate a nuclear doctrine rapidly thereafter. That we were able to do so was thanks to the preparatory thinking and work of a remarkable handful of people, including K. Subrahmanyam, who had thought this through beforehand.

I will not repeat the doctrine as you no doubt are already familiar with it. Instead I will only highlight a few of its main features. For India nuclear

weapons were not meant as a war-fighting weapon, to compensate for a perceived inferiority in conventional or other spheres, (as is the case for Pakistan and North Korea).

For India, from the start the purpose of nuclear weapons was to deter nuclear attack and to prevent the sort of nuclear coercion or threat that we had faced in the seventies and eighties. It was therefore logical for the doctrine to promise “no-first-use” against others, and to threaten assured and massive retaliation if attacked with nuclear weapons. In other words, it assumed a secure second-strike capability for deterrence through assured retaliation. In order to assure retaliation, the force had to be reliable and have survivability.

The no-first-use and assured retaliation concepts naturally had significant direct implications for our nuclear strategy and posture:

- for one it became essential that we develop a genuine delivery triad as soon as possible, not only to ensure survivability of our second strike capability but to assure retaliation.
- Matching the number of warheads and missiles that our adversaries have become less important than the reliability and survivability of our own weapons. (This is relevant today when, by all accounts Pakistan is building two new Plutonium producing reactors and a large reprocessing plant and is increasing the rate of manufacture of nuclear warheads.) While first-use equals aggression, no-first-use equals deterrence. And deterrence requires the minimum number of weapons to make the threat of retaliation credible --- in other words, credible minimum deterrence. We can thus escape an expensive arms race in nuclear weapons while safeguarding our security.
- As these were weapons of deterrence rather than war-fighting weapons, it became crucial that our adversaries believed that they would be used if certain thresholds would be crossed.
- For the same reason, calibrated deterrence was ruled out. Instead counter value targeting, rather than counter-force targeting was the logical posture. It is for this reason that our nuclear armed Prithvis with

their limited range are effective deterrents, since the only real targets for them are the cities of the Pakistani Punjab.

- If you rule out first use of nuclear weapons, you need to possess other means to deal with non-nuclear threats and challenges. (I will explain this in more detail later.)

Interestingly, as expressed, our doctrine is closest to the Chinese declared doctrine. Like us China had declared a (somewhat more hedged) no-first-use policy. After toying in the late eighties with a shift to tactical nuclear weapons, she reversed that decision in the mid-nineties. For a very long period, since 1964, she has accepted a huge asymmetry in the numbers of her nuclear weapons compared to those of her main potential adversaries the USA and the Soviet Union/Russia. She concentrated instead on the survivability of her arsenal to assure retaliation. China has so far not made a direct nuclear threat against India, as one would expect from a country who does not regard its nuclear arsenal as a war-fighting weapon. In recent years China has concentrated on technical improvements in her nuclear arsenal (such as MIRVing and MARVing her warheads) and in producing nuclear class missiles in vast numbers and equipping them with PGMs as well, so as to confuse the adversary and maximise strategic deception.

There is, however, a clear difference between our doctrine and Pakistan's. In the red lines that Lt.-Gen Naqvi made known, for instance, Pakistan clearly wants us to believe that she will use her nuclear weapons for tactical uses if certain thresholds are crossed. During her last Azm-i-Nau exercises in 2010 she signalled to us that she was preparing to use nuclear weapons against Indian forces if they were on Pakistani territory, (a counter to what they think "Cold Start" means).

Our Experience

At the most general level, the decision to go overtly nuclear in 1998 has been vindicated by our experience since then. As these weapons were meant to

prevent nuclear coercion and blackmail, they have actually done so. The only direct threat since 1998 was by Pakistan in May 2002, during Operation Parakram when they were convinced that India was on the verge of launching military action against them. As it was not our intent to do so, the threat was meaningless and did not affect our behaviour. Not having been deterred by nuclear threats in 1971, 1987 or 1990 from following our course when we were in a much weaker position, our overt nuclear weapons status makes us much less vulnerable to them today.

India-China deterrence is stable and will remain so despite its reaching equilibriums at higher technological levels as both programmes develop increasing sophistication.

However, there are issues about India-Pakistan deterrence post-1998, and particularly after operation Parakram, that merit continuing examination and that we need to think through. Pakistan has consistently sought to use nuclear deterrence to permit her to undertake adventurist actions against India, in J&K or elsewhere. Her Kargil misadventure in 1999 was an attempt to use the threat of nuclear escalation to prevent an Indian escalation and response to her conventional attempt to seize and hold territory in J&K. The attempt backfired, leading the world and US to intervene to push Pakistan to withdraw her troops. However, that it resulted in military and diplomatic failure for Pakistan is not widely understood in the Pakistan Army. In fact the Pakistan Army seems to have drawn the lesson that India's decision to respect the LOC, (born out of a desire to legitimise the LOC), was a result of Pakistan's nuclear deterrence working to prevent an Indian riposte elsewhere or an escalation to full-scale conventional hostilities, thus limiting the conflict to Pakistan's advantage.

If the lessons learnt by the Pakistan Army from Kargil were mixed, their practice since Parakram suggests that they may have unfortunately drawn a more dangerous conclusion still. The Pakistan Army seems to believe that Pakistan's nuclear shield permits her to undertake terrorist attacks on India

without fear of retaliation. This may well have been the Pakistan Army calculation behind the Mumbai attack of 26 November 2008. The Pakistan Army believes that their Brasstacks and 1990 nuclear threats worked and prevented Indian retaliation and action then, as after the Mumbai attack.

What then is the answer to this Pakistani belief in their immunity from retaliation against terrorism and other asymmetric attacks against India thanks to their nuclear deterrent? One response would be to revise our nuclear doctrine and strategy to a war-fighting one, developing tactical nuclear weapons and threatening to use them. But this is hardly credible. To threaten that a terrorist attack from Pakistan on India would be answered by the use of nuclear weapons would be like killing a mosquito with a shotgun and is unlikely to be understood by our own people let alone the international community.

The answer to asymmetric threats must therefore lie in a strategy of flexible response, outside the nuclear end of the spectrum of conflict. In Pakistan's particular case this would require a deliberate strategy of containment which raises the costs of terrorism as a state policy to Pakistan on a long term basis. There are several responses short of war available to a state like India.

It seems to me that rather than seeking answers in our nuclear weapons to all the threats that we do or may face, it is important that we maintain the fundamentals of our doctrine, treating our nuclear weapons as political instruments which deter nuclear attack and attempts at coercion. As for non-nuclear threats, there are other ways of dealing with them which should not be beyond our ingenuity and capability to find.

There are of course several other issues related to our nuclear strategy that you will no doubt be examining. Among them are: the effects on deterrence of the ballistic missile defences that both Pakistan and China are seeking to build; the risks of nuclear weapons unauthorised use or falling into terrorist hands as the Pakistani state withers away; command, control and custody

issues when nuclear weapons are treated as war-fighting weapons as Pakistan does; and nuclear and missile proliferation in our neighbourhood as in Iran and North Korea, for instance. Each of these affects our security directly and will require analysis and responses in our nuclear strategy. If we can do what we have done so far, which is to think for ourselves and devise our own doctrines and solutions to problems, developing a nuclear strategy that is uniquely Indian, I am sure that we will be successful in dealing with these questions as well.

I do hope that I have given you some sense of the complexity, interest and joys of a subject that is normally regarded as arcane and esoteric. I wish you every success.

Thank you